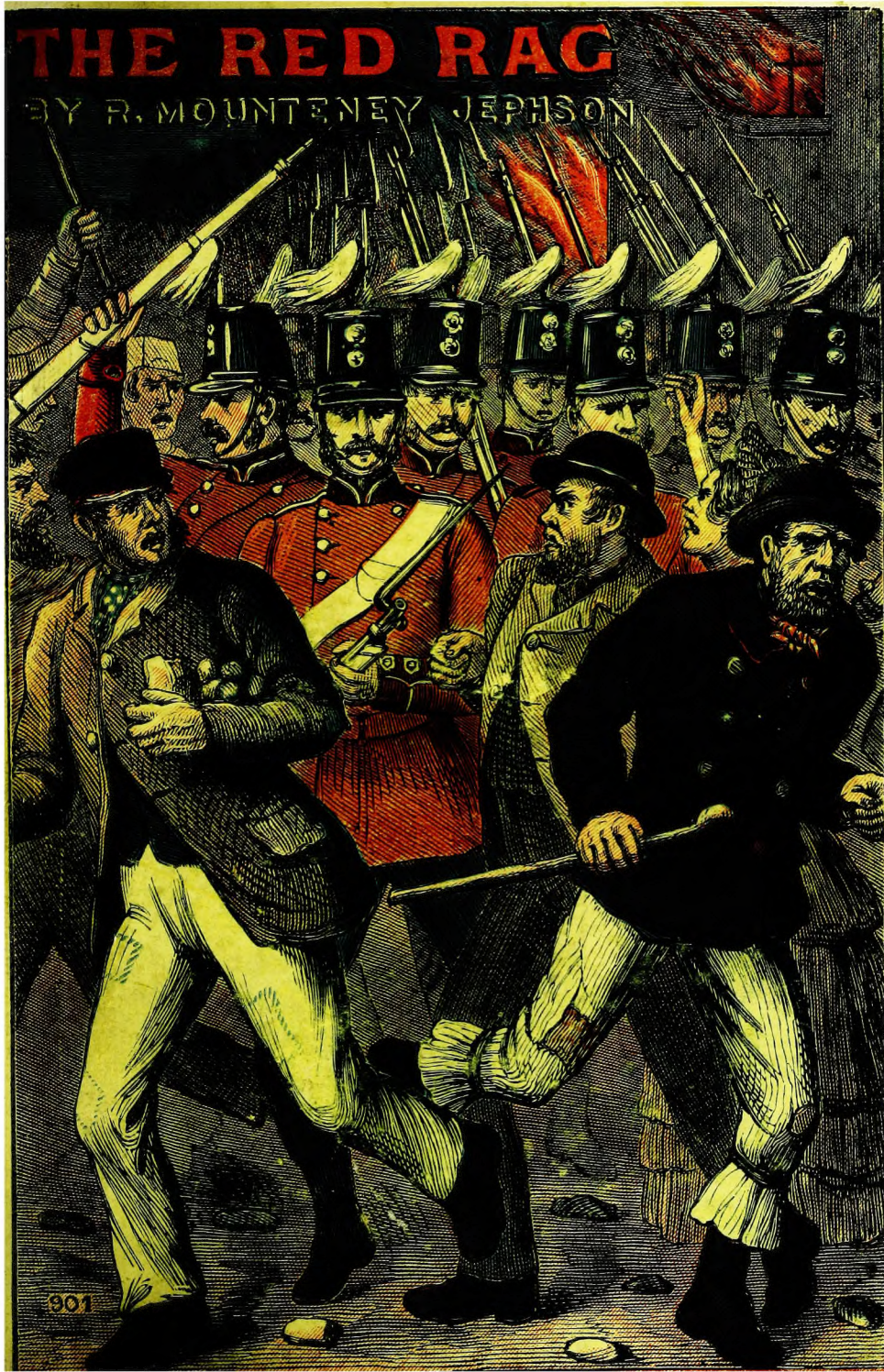


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BY R. MOUNTENEY JEPHSON



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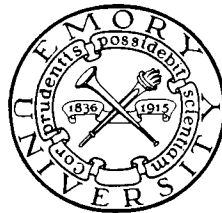
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THE RED RAG

A NOVEL

BY

R. MOUNTENEY JEPHSON

AUTHOR OF

'TOM BULLKLEY OF LISSINGTON'

LONDON

GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS

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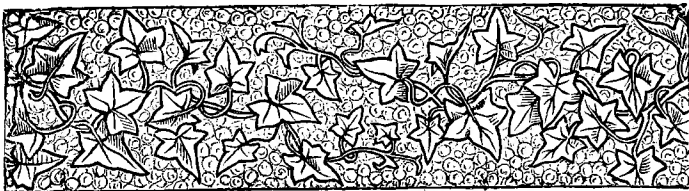
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THE RED RAG.

PART I.

*RETURN OF THE QUEEN'S OWN FUSILIERS FROM
THE CRIMEA.*

CHAPTER I.

PEACE AT ANY PRICE.

‘**D**ON’T talk nonsense, Georgina! I maintain that Puddleton is making itself utterly contemptible.’

Thus spake with considerable, though I am sorry to add not unusual asperity, Mr. Joshua Buddlecombe, the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton.

Of course the reader has heard of Puddleton. And yet I am not so sure of that. It is proverbial—and what is proverbial must be founded on fact—that the world knows least of its greatest men, and the world’s knowledge

may, in like manner, be limited with regard to its greatest towns.

But the reader *should* have heard of Puddleton. There is no excuse for his or her ignorance ; for just let me tell him or her that he or she would cut a pretty figure without the articles which have raised Puddleton to its urban greatness. Not to know Puddleton argues yourself, if not unknown, at all events ungrateful, for you owe a great deal to Puddleton. However, instead of any longer falling foul of the reader's ignorance, let me at once proceed to enlighten it by stating that buttons are the comparative trifles from which so mighty a result as Puddleton's prosperity has sprung.

Now let me inform any reader who may be inclined to ridicule such a source of greatness as Puddleton's that there is a great deal in a button. I do not mean in a material, sordid way, connected with clothing or trade. I mean in a general, social, historical, ethical kind of a way. In which of his characters does Shakespeare tread so close on the heel of the tragic Muse herself as to almost gall her kibe (if she has one)? King Lear. And what is the last dying request of this unfortunate old monarch? It is simply and touchingly, 'Pray you, undo this button.' Now Shakespeare must have thought there

was a great deal in a button, or he would not have introduced it on such an occasion.

Again, to descend from high tragedy to low comedy, and yet still to continue in the highest realms of genius, is it not wholly and solely on a button that the ingenious plot which thickens round poor Mr. Winkle hangs when he is challenged to fight a duel? Here Dickens endorsed in one way what Shakespeare proved in another, that there is a great deal in a button. And even from the homely but vigorous phrase 'Dash my buttons!' may the same lesson be learned. What a picture of dilapidation does the expression conjure up! 'O what a falling off is there!' might anyone exclaim who was to witness it. This peculiar form of commination is, too, as happy an instance of *brutum fulmen* as can be imagined. It is 'mouth-filling' enough to have pleased Hotspur, and yet not sufficiently strong to offend a Quaker. As little wanton boys experience in smashing a sheet of ice all the delights of breaking windows without any of the pains or penalties attaching to that pastime, so in the use of the phrase 'Dash my buttons!' there is all the excitement and dash and relief of swearing without any

of the harm. But enough of Puddleton and the source of its greatness. Now turn we once more again to the personification of that greatness, Puddleton's Mayor. History repeats itself, and surely a Mayor who lives in history may do the same.

‘Don't talk nonsense, Georgina! I maintain that Puddleton is making itself utterly contemptible.’

As Mr. Buddlecombe delivered this remark, he rose from his chair and stood on the hearthrug, which is to the domestic autocrat very much what the quarter-deck is to the captain of a man-of-war—the spot whence he fulminates the thunderbolts of his authority with the greatest effect.

‘Notwithstanding all my efforts as the Mayor of this town,’ went on Mr. Buddlecombe, evidently working himself up into a rage, and to judge from his countenance he had not to work very hard against the grain—‘notwithstanding indignation meetings convened by me, and protests, and petitions, and representations, Puddleton is made a military quarter; and instead of resenting the injury, Puddleton dresses itself out in flags and determines upon giving a public welcome to

these "Crimean heroes," as it chooses to dub these red-coated, drumming and trumpeting individuals who have just been practising their legalised trade of wholesale murder on a pretty large scale.'

'Nonsense, Joshua ; think of the glory !' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, waving a knitting-needle with the air of a conquering heroine.

'Nonsense, Georgina ; think of the depression in the button-trade !' rejoined Mr. Buddlecombe.

'How on earth can the war have affected the button-trade ?' said Mrs. Buddlecombe. 'I am sure I have not worn one button less since the declaration of hostilities, nor one button more since the conclusion of peace ; and I do not suppose I am singular in these respects.'

'Georgina,' rejoined Mr. Buddlecombe, loftily, 'the state of the button-trade is not to be gauged by the number of buttons, more or less, that you or any other people wear. Trade is a wonderful, a sublime, a beautiful system, formed very much on the sympathetic principle of the human body. Injure it in one portion and the whole suffers. If you cannot bring a little more intelligence to bear on the subject, and a little more appreciation

of its noble grandeur, you had better leave it alone.'

'I am quite willing to leave it alone,' retorted Mrs. Buddlecombe, gradually warming to her work. 'And if you, Joshua, cannot bring a little more intelligence, as well as a little more tolerance, to bear on the military topic, *you* had better leave *it* alone.'

'I shall not do anything of the sort,' said Mr. Buddlecombe. 'It is my duty to denounce this festering sore on the face of civilisation whenever it crops up.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, 'I beg to state on *my* part, I am delighted to see that Puddleton takes a very different view of the matter, and deems it an honour, instead of a foul disgrace, to be afforded the opportunity of welcoming with every mark of pride and joy these brave and victorious sons of old England. Yes, at this moment we should not only be proud of our soldiers, but we should feel grateful to them.'

'O, do you know,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, regarding his wife as if she had been a dose of the coldest-drawn castor oil, 'this turns one sick, positively sick. If the army were dressed like Quakers, and went about quietly

when not engaged in slaughter, you would regard them with loathing. But simply because they bedizen themselves up in glaring colours, and bang a drum, and blow their own trumpet, a large majority of your sex, and I blush to add, a foolish portion of mine, are taken in, and think them wonderful fellows. I could fancy savages being impressed by a red rag and a tom-tom; or children pleased with the too-tooing of a trumpet. But civilised adults—Pshaw! You place yourself, Georgina, in the same intellectual category with children and savages. You hear the voice of the charmer in the banging of a big drum, and your senses are dazzled with a red rag. Now, if you were only consistent in your childish and savage tastes, and derived ample amusement from a rattle, and thought a string of glass beads and a feather the height of personal adornment, I might find in the diminution of my current expenses some consolation for your fatuity.’

‘Red rag, indeed!’ exclaimed Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘I am sure the term is much more appropriate in your case; for the army is to you exactly what a red rag is to a bull. It drives you wild. Thank you, Joshua, for the

hint. I shall call the army, in future, your red rag.'

Though a match for almost any woman with his tongue, Mr. Buddlecombe was temporarily silenced by this adroit turning of the tables, and Mrs. Buddlecombe, now thoroughly roused, followed up the attack :

'I am very glad, however, that your fellow-townsmen do not take the same bovine view of the red rag. I am delighted to find that the sordid employment of making buttons, to which Puddleton is addicted, has not deadened its mind to all feelings of glory and patriotism.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' spluttered Mr. Buddlecombe. 'The idea of disparaging the highly respectable, the ingenious, the useful employment of making buttons, and glorifying the disgraceful calling of slashing and cutting and shooting your fellow-creatures! It's outrageous! To hear such sentiments proceed from the lips of any woman would be shocking; but when that woman is a lady, and that lady is a Mayoress, and that Mayoress is my wife, it makes me tingle from head to foot with shame!'

'Nonsense, Joshua! I maintain that making buttons is an utterly contemptible occupation compared with that of defending your country

at the risk of your life. What,' concluded Mrs. Buddlecombe, rising from her seat with the dignity befitting a Mayoress,—‘what would society be without its defenders, Joshua?’

‘What ~~would~~ society be without its buttons, Georgina? I blush to think of society in a buttonless condition.’

And here the Mayor of Puddleton assumed a mien of awful propriety, not altogether unmingled with a conscious air of having ‘scored one.’

‘You’re really too ridiculous, Joshua,’ retorted Mrs. Buddlecombe, as she walked to a low French window and looked out into the garden, partly to see if her daughter, Florence, were returning from her morning’s ride, and partly to hide just a little chagrin at this last effective parry and counter. ‘And you are so illogical, Joshua,’ she continued, as she turned from the window; ‘so provokingly illogical. Soldiers must be somewhere; and if they were not at Puddleton they would have to be at some other town. So they might just as well be here as anywhere else.’

‘Not at all,’ snapped Mr. Buddlecombe, turning sharp round on his wife. ‘Soldiers should be nowhere. They shouldn’t exist.

What's a standing army but a standing slur on civilisation, a glaring anachronism, a perpetual menace to peace and goodwill amongst men, a dangerous tool in the hands of ambition, a gigantic fraud on the ratepayer, a fierce seething whirlpool of temptation, into which——'

'O dear, O dear! I think we have heard that before,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, placing her hand to her ears.

'Don't dare to interrupt me, Georgina! I *shall* have my say! What is the whole army, to put it in its mildest light, but a ridiculous anomaly? We visit punishment with the utmost rigour of the law on the heads of wretched prize-fighters, who only maul each other about with their fists; and yet we maintain, at an enormous expense, thousands upon thousands of an infinitely more noxious variety of the species whose recognised business is slaughter and carnage, with every description of deadly engine that misdirected science can invent for their use. I employ the expression "*misdirected* science" advisedly. From a careful calculation which I have made with the view to exposing, by means of my next pamphlet, the unspeakable iniquity of war in,

perhaps, its most shocking light, I find that a 68-pounder gun—which, I am told, is now the *chef-d'œuvre* of murderous invention—would furnish enough material for exactly 1,341,537 metal buttons of the largest size we turn out—such buttons, in fact, as might be supplied to charity-schools.'

This last reflection was so painful that Mr. Buddlecombe paused, and, with a deep sigh, sought consolation in his snuff-box.

'How much more noble,' he continued, in somewhat calmer, though sad, tones, 'how much more in accordance with the true fitness of things, if Government had converted all this mass of metal into such buttons'—here he took a final pinch of snuff, accompanied by the gentle soliloquy—'and given me the contract. I have calculated that, allowing eight buttons for each boy—six in front and two behind—I could provide, out of a 68-pounder gun, buttons for 167,692 boys, and one button over. What a contrast do the two pictures afford! In the one, ghastly hecatombs of mangled humanity; in the other, 167,692 chubby-cheeked charity-boys, smiling and happy in the proud consciousness of possessing eight bright buttons apiece—to say nothing

of the one button over. Is not the reflection, that the former picture is the chosen one, enough to wring the heart of any right-thinking man, woman, or child? Is not this, I say, enough——'

Here the sweet fresh voice of a young girl, warbling some joyous little ditty, floated through the open French window. Breaking in upon Mr. Buddlecombe's querulous tones, it was like the playful tinkling of a lambkin's bell after the fussy gruff barks of the old sheep-dog.

'Hush! there's Florry come in from her morning's ride,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'Yes; now you'll be good enough not to introduce the military topic before her, Georgina,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, grimly. 'No more rides for her alone with old Reins, the coachman, now that the neighbourhood will be infested by reprobates in regimentals, I can tell her!'

As the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton pronounced this sentence, he took up his newspaper and seated himself in an easy-chair. He had just settled down to the money article when the fair young warbler appeared at the open window, and arrested her footsteps and her song to stand surveying her parents with

a playful demeanour, which, as regarded Mr. Buddlecombe, was not reciprocated. Florence Buddlecombe was an only child, and was still at the proverbially sweet age of seventeen. With her soft blue eyes, her fair complexion, and her hair,

‘A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men,’

she would have carried off the palm for beauty in most assemblages of pretty girls. Then, too, she was an heiress; and when viewed from this standpoint, she was supernaturally lovely. She had normally a sweet bright expression, but on this especial morning a heart filled with a secret joy illumined her countenance, until it was radiant with happiness, as well as with health, youth, and beauty

As she stood at the French window, her lithe figure shown off to the greatest advantage in her close-fitting riding-habit, a jaunty hat perched knowingly on her well-shaped little head, her eyes dancing with joy, her cheery lips parted into a smile which showed the whitest and evenest row of teeth imaginable, and her soft cheeks aglow with the exercise in the fresh morning air, she formed a sweet picture, at which Mrs. Buddlecombe gazed with

fond and admiring eyes, but which only drew from Mr. Buddlecombe, as he glanced at the fair vision from over the top of his newspaper, a low growl that he didn't know what she had to grin so about this morning.

'Well, papa,' said Florence gaily, as she advanced, and playfully tapped her father's newspaper with her riding-whip, 'why don't you have a flag flying from our flagstaff? Puddleton's *en fête*, and our house looks quite conspicuous by the absence of bunting.'

A savage grunt from behind the newspaper was all the reply.

'Let your papa alone, Florry darling,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe. 'He's busy reading the paper. Come and tell me what you've been doing.'

Thusenjoined, the light-hearted Florry rattled away, regardless, or rather, in the exuberance of her spirits, unconscious, of the nods and winks and frowns with which her mother sought to warn her off the dangerous ground.

'O, such fun, mamma! I met my dear old godpapa, Mr. Bolitho, riding on his cob, and he says the regiment will arrive at the railway-station very soon, and he was going up there to see; and he has promised to ride down to

tell us when they're coming, so that we may go to the lodge and see them pass. And what *do* you think—the dear funny old thing said I should be having half-a-dozen young officers at my feet, and that I wasn't to go falling in love with more than one at a time, and——'

Here Mr. Buddlecombe started to his feet and dashed his newspaper down.

'Silence, prattling idiot!' he roared. 'Babbling booby, be still!'

In one bound Florence was by her mother's side, where she stood cowering while Mr. Buddlecombe continued to pour out the vials of his wrath.

'Look here, Florence! If I ever hear another word of this vile trash, I'll pack you off to your aunt Virginia in the North. Old Bolitho is a confounded old fool, and I consider him a very improper person to be your godfather. He's "such a dear funny old thing," is he? And "you'll have half-a-dozen young officers at your feet," will you? Much more likely they'll have my feet at *them*. And you "mustn't go falling in love with——" I'll tell you what it is: I'll take precious good care you don't. As long as this neighbourhood is contaminated by these scamps in regi-

mentals, you'll have uncommon few opportunities for seeing them at your feet, and all the rest of the trash of that miserable old dotard Bolitho. You'll be confined to these grounds, except when you go out with me ; and when you're out with me, if you even so much as glance at one of these puppies, I'll pack you off to your aunt Virginia in the North by the very next train. So mark my words, my vivacious young lady '

And here Mr. Buddlecombe turned on his heel and paced up and down the room, muttering to himself: 'Preposterous! That a girl to whom I give thirty thousand pounds on her wedding-day, and on whose education no expense has been spared, should be guilty of such abominable sentiments!'

Suddenly Mr. Buddlecombe stopped his furious promenade up and down the room ; and, turning sharp round, addressed Florence in ironical tones

'I think you suggested that I should hoist a flag. A capital idea! Yes, I *shall* hoist a flag to celebrate the entry of the military into Puddleton.'

So saying, Mr. Buddlecombe bustled out of the room in a grimly mysterious manner.



CHAPTER II.

STARTLING DISCLOSURES.

‘**D**ON’T cry, my dear Florry,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe ; for Florence’s great blue eyes, which a few moments before had been dancing with fun and joy, were now dim with tears. ‘You know your father’s extraordinary antipathy to the military, Florry, and really you should have been more careful. There, never mind !’

‘O yes, I know ; it was very stupid of me,’ said Florry, smiling through her tears. ‘But I couldn’t help it, mamma. My heart is so full this morning that I am even more impulsive than usual.’

‘So full, Florry ! Full of what ? And what is there in this morning to fill it so very full of anything ?’ asked her mother.

Florence played nervously with her riding-whip, blushed crimson, bit her lips, became pale, and then flushed again.

‘Come, Florry, tell me,’ said her mother, in gentle affectionate tones, at the same time drawing her arm fondly round her daughter’s slim waist.

‘Well, mamma,’ said Florence, apparently engaged in an absorbing examination of the gold mounting on her riding-whip, ‘do you remember Mr. Warriner whom we met at Folkestone, when you and I were there alone together two summers ago?’

‘Yes, perfectly’

‘Well, this is his regiment, just returned from the Crimea, that’s expected at Puddleton to-day’

‘Is it really? I am sure, child, I had quite forgotten what regiment he belonged to.’

‘I hadn’t, mamma. I—I think you liked Mr. Warriner, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, particularly so, Florry. Handsome but not conceited, manly and yet gentle, thoroughly self-possessed and yet not forward, I thought him altogether one of the most charming young men I had ever met.’

This panegyric brought the blood mantling

proudly to Florence's cheek, and encouraged her to speak her mind out a little more plainly.

‘You would not be astonished then to hear, mamma, that I—I——’

Here maidenly bashfulness stopped her, and Mrs. Buddlecombe was left to pick up the delicate thread of their discourse.

‘Not in the least astonished, Florry dear,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, after a long, earnest gaze at her daughter. ‘I should have been astonished a few minutes ago; but I now know your secret without your having told it to me. Ah, Florry, it does not necessarily require a tongue to tell a tale of love. There are a thousand other modes and indications just as eloquent as, and more so very often than, words. Your father, for instance, first told *his* love by means of——’

‘What, mamma, what?’ asked Florence, with breathless interest, for Mrs. Buddlecombe had tantalisingly paused to sigh over the tender reminiscence.

‘Mutton-chops, darling!’

‘Mutton-chops, mamma!’ screamed Florry.

‘O, how horrible!’

‘Yes, mutton-chops, Florry. And now,

having told you so much, I feel I had better tell you all. My mother was passionately fond of dogs, especially little ones, of which sort she always had three or four about her; and she frequently declared that they were better judges of human nature than humanity itself. One day, in the hearing of Joshua, who was paying us a visit, she stated her determination never to allow me to marry a man towards whom her dogs exhibited any marked antipathy, "for," said she, "I am convinced they, in common with all their species, possess the keenest intuition of good and evil in human nature." I did not notice it, but my mother did, and told me, some time afterwards, that upon this remark of hers a look of gloomy despair clouded Joshua's brow, for he was not popular with my mother's pets; and after a visit to us he always took his departure considerably damaged about the shoe-laces and the edges of his trousers, owing to their persistent hostility. On his next visit, however, there was an extraordinary change in the behaviour of these little animals. They jumped and frisked about Joshua, and they fawned upon him. They even tried to get into his pocket, and when he went away it

was all we could do to prevent them from following him.

““There,” said my mother, “*that’s* the man I should like to see you married to, Georgina. That’s a man after my own heart.”

““O, nonsense, mamma,” I said; “Mr. Buddlecombe has not an idea of me, I’m sure.”

““I’m sorry for it, my dear,” said my mother; “for I am convinced he has an honest nature and a kind heart, or my dogs would never take to him as they do.”

‘The next visit Joshua paid us, the same sort of thing went on. The little dogs would not leave him for a moment, and they hung about him with a fondness which my mother said was quite touching, and this raised him higher than ever in her estimation.

““He was,” she said, “without exception, the best man she had ever come across: for never had she met a man to whom her little dogs had taken such a violent fancy.”

‘Unfortunately, however, my brother, your uncle Tom, Florry, came in to show us a mastiff he had just bought from a man in the streets.

““I don’t suppose he’s seen an ounce of meat for the last fortnight,” said your uncle

Tom, in his pleasant off-hand manner ; “ he’s half-starved now, but when I feed him up a bit he’ll be an out-and-out stunner, and as big as a donkey.”

““He seems quite fascinated with Mr. Buddlecombe ; what an extraordinary, what a beautiful, I may say sublime, influence you seem to exercise over dogs !” exclaimed my mother, in tones of the deepest admiration.

““Yes ; but I — I find I’ve a pressing engagement,” said your papa, in a strange, nervous manner, and rising from his chair.

‘These words were hardly out of his mouth when a scene ensued which I shall never forget, Florry. The mastiff just took one sniff at Joshua, and the next moment Joshua was on his back on the hearth-rug, with the huge brute over him, devouring his very vitals, as we all thought, to our horror. We soon thankfully discovered, however, that your father had sustained no personal injury. The skirts of his greatcoat were torn right off, and three mutton-chops were transferred with wondrous rapidity from the pocket of that garment to the interior of the voracious monster. The whole thing then flashed through my brain, and I may add my heart as well,

that Joshua was trying to win my young untried affections, and then my hand, by first gaining the goodwill of my mother. But, Florry dear, never let your father know that I told you this little episode in his courtship. He has never been able to bear the sight of a mutton-chop since. But with *me* it is different. Mutton-chops are always tenderly associated in *my* mind with the first dawn of love——'

Here Mrs. Buddlecombe paused for a moment, and then added dreamily :

'Especially the flaps, for it was those parts of them we first saw protruding from Joshua's pocket, and which, with a blood-curdling thrill of horror, I took for portions of his anatomy. I did not know until that awful moment how much I loved him.'

'O mamma, how horrible !' exclaimed Florence ; 'how atrociously unromantic ! I'm glad the first dawn of *my* love has no such vile associations. No,' added the young girl, rapturously, 'it is linked in fond memory with the warring of the elements as we stood together one stormy afternoon on the Lees at Folkestone, and gazed down on the white-crested waves of the English Channel——'

'With the *chops* of the Channel, in short,'

said Mrs. Buddlecombe, with a sly smile. 'You see, Florry, there's a strong similarity in our cases, after all.'

'O mamma,' screamed Florry, stuffing her fingers into her ears, and laughing, 'I won't listen ; it's sacrilege.'

'Well, but seriously, Florry darling, you're in love, eh ?'

'O, irretrievably !' replied Florence, opening her eyes wide, and looking very solemn and determined.

'I am sorry for it. I had no idea it had been anything more than just a mild little passing boy-and-girlish flirtation. I am *very* sorry for it, Florry.'

'Why, mamma, why ?' asked Florry, peering eagerly into her mother's eyes, while a startled look of pain and fear flitted into the fair young face.

'Because, my child,' replied Mrs. Buddlecombe, with a steadfast but tender gaze, 'I fear no good can come of it. Your father will never countenance anything of the sort. I tremble to think of the effect the disclosure would have upon him. It would be like putting a lighted match into a barrel of gunpowder. Such is his blind unreasoning

antipathy to the army, that I believe he would sooner see you married to a field-labourer than to a field-marshal.'

'It makes me tremble too when I think of it; but I have an idea, mamma, that it will all come right in the end,' said Florence, with that truly youthful belief in the efficacy of the future. 'And, O, after all the suspense of the last eighteen months, while he has been away in that dreadful land, that awful valley of the shadow of death, I feel this morning too happy in the consciousness of his safe return to think of anything more than that. What a happy day this is compared with that dark day of horror when I read in the newspapers, "Severely wounded, Lieutenant Algernon Fitzmaurice Warriner, Queen's Own Fusiliers"! How I passed the time and kept up appearances before you all until the next mail brought better news, I know not!'

'Hush, Florry, here's your father!' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, who was not quite so intent in the listening as Florence was in the telling.

'I've hoisted my flag to celebrate the entry of the military into Puddleton,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as he came fussing into the room; 'and I've derived a certain amount of

gloomy satisfaction from hoisting it half-mast high. If I had only had a black flag with a Death's head and cross-bones, I'd have hoisted *that*. But I hadn't, and so I used the Union Jack upside down instead. And if I only possessed sufficient experience in explosives, I'd further console myself by firing off minute-guns; or if my musical education had not been neglected, I'd play a solo on the muffled drum. That could hardly be construed into a manifestation of rejoicing by even the most bigoted admirer of the military. Moreover, if——'

Here a heavy footstep in the veranda outside, tramping in time to a hearty gruff-toned rendering of the 'British Grenadiers,' cut short Mr. Buddlecombe in the full flow of his rhetoric.

'Bother Bolitho!' he ejaculated. 'Everybody that comes to the house this morning seems to think it necessary to herald his or her approach with a song. First of all, Florence comes in caterwauling, and then this old porpoise Bolitho comes pounding along my veranda, and making a noise like a rhinoceros in a fit, which I've no doubt he calls singing.'

At this point, after humming the martial

air up to the last moment before coming into view, Mr. Bolitho entered the room with a beaming smile on his fine red old face, his low-crowned broad-brimmed beaver in one hand and an enormous nosegay in the other. Mr. Bolitho, or 'old Joe Bolitho,' as he was generally called in Puddleton and the neighbourhood, was a Puddletonian born and bred. He and Mr. Buddlecombe had been boys together, a fact he constantly alluded to with infinite relish. He was a fine hearty old fellow of about eighteen stone in weight and sixty years of age. He was not exactly a congenial companion for a person whose nervous system was completely deranged; but for anyone in fair condition of mind and body, who did not mind a noise and an occasional prod in the ribs, there could not have been a jollier associate than old Joe Bolitho. By the young of both sexes he was idolised.

'Ah, how are you, my dear Mrs. Buddlecombe?' said Mr. Bolitho, as he threw his hat and his nosegay on to a table, and then seized the lady by both her hands. 'Well, Florry, little girl, seen you before this morning. How are you, Buddle?' this last inquiry being accompanied by a poke in the worshipful ribs.

‘Quite well, thank you, “mine own familiar friend,”’ replied Mr. Buddlecombe, resenting the liberty by drawing himself up into a dignified attitude, which was completely lost on Joe Bolitho.

‘That’s right. With the tow-row-row-de-dow-dow of the British—Excuse me, Mrs. Buddlecombe, excuse me, my dear lady, I am in such a state of martial enthusiasm that I can’t help being a little demonstrative.’

‘I admire it in you, Mr. Bolitho. I only wish you could instil a little of your fine patriotic feeling into a certain other individual,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, while Mr. Buddlecombe sought refuge in his newspaper, his usual sanctuary.

‘And what’s that enormous bouquet for, Mr. Bolitho?’ asked Florence.

‘That, Florry? That’s for you to throw at the head of the column as it marches past the lodge-gates,’ said Mr. Bolitho, seizing the bouquet, and waving it enthusiastically over his head: ‘Beauty crowning Valour!’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, lowering his newspaper and glaring fiercely over it. ‘Florence, if you dare to crown

Valour I'll send you to bed and stop your pocket-money !'

'Then *I* shall, Mr. Bolitho !' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, with an extremely majestic bearing, accompanied by an insubordinate glance at her spouse.

'*You* ! Do you consider, Mrs. Buddlecombe, that you are fitted at your time of life to enact the part of Beauty ?'

And here Mr. Buddlecombe, having propounded this question, rose from his chair and awaited the answer with his hands under his coat-tails.

'Certainly,' replied Mrs. Buddlecombe, stung to the quick by this unmanly, this brutal allusion to a lady's age. 'Certainly ; for *you*, Mr. Buddlecombe, are playing the companion *rôle* to such perfection : Beauty and the—ahem !' This last with a significant wave of the hand towards her husband.

'Ha, ha, ha !' roared old Bolitho.

'Bolitho should be muffled and sunk down a well when he's in a facetious mood, and then one might delude one's self into the belief that he was only distant thunder,' snarled Mr. Buddlecombe, as he stumped off to his arm-chair and his newspaper in high dudgeon.



CHAPTER III.

CONQUERING HEROES.

MR. BOLITHO, in his own boundless good-nature, was proof against his old boy-friend's ill-temper ; so all he said, when Mr. Buddlecombe plumped himself down into an arm-chair, and retired with a grunt behind his newspaper, was,

‘Ah, Buddle, my boy, you’re not yourself to-day.’

‘Never mind him, Mr. Bolitho ; he’s hardly a responsible being this morning,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘Now tell us about the arrival of the regiment ; we’re longing to hear,’ she added, in lower tones.

‘Yes, do, Mr. Bolitho. Do you know, I think I must have caught some of your enthusiasm,’ whispered Florence, archly.

‘Well, they’ll soon pass,’ replied Mr. Bolitho, without the slightest attempt at abating *his* voice. Indeed, of that he was incapable. When Nature had provided him with a *vox humana* she had altogether omitted the *piano* stop. ‘I was up at the station and saw the brave fellows arrive ; and I’ve had a delightful morning. I’ve cheered until I feel as if I had swallowed a nutmeg-grater ; and I’ve shaken their hands until I thought my arm was going to drop out of its socket. Capital fun ; first-rate fun !’

‘*Sharkung a song goo*,’ muttered Mr. Buddlecombe, who was a dreadful old gourmand, and having very recently imported a long-sighed-after luxury, in the shape of a French cook, now entertained for the beautiful language in which his bills of fare were daily couched a tender passion, which he vented in an occasional French expression.

That his acquaintance with the language was limited, and his pronunciation of it villainous, is only what can be said of most of even the educated classes of his countrymen twenty years ago. The *entente cordiale*, with its reciprocity in language, if not in trade, was not as firmly cemented then as it is now, and

even at the present day there are many highly-educated Englishmen, perfect masters of their own language, who pronounce French no better than Mr. Buddlecombe did a quarter of a century ago. Consequently his shortcomings in French orthoëpy must not be taken to indicate that he was either vulgar or uneducated.

‘I never,’ continued Mr. Bolitho, in the same excited strain, ‘recognised so fully the fitness of the term “rank and *file*,” as when I shook those gallant hands, rough with the grasp of the rifle.’

‘I should like to shake hands with the whole regiment, from the colonel down to the smallest drummer!’ exclaimed Mrs. Buddlecombe.

‘Mrs. Buddlecombe,’ said old Joe Bolitho, seizing both her hands, while Mr. Buddlecombe’s paper rustled ominously, ‘my dear Mrs. Buddlecombe, that sentiment does you honour. It is a sentiment which should fill the hearts of all the countrywomen of those men who have braved death by battle and pestilence in a noble and complete vindication of their country’s honour. The memory of their deeds should be vividly in our minds this day. How well I remember the graphic descriptions of the glorious fighting which appeared in our papers

from time to time, and stirred the heart of old England to its very core! Something of this sort: "The Guards are hotly engaged; the shots fly like hail; the shells scream through the air; the rattle of musketry is incessant; but not a man wavers, except to fall, badly hit." Bravo! Well done! "Up, Guards, and at 'em!"

Here old Joe Bolitho burst forth once more into a few notes of the 'British Grenadiers, after which he continued, with unabated zest:

"The Rifles on the right are hard pressed; they are in danger of being cut off, and are fighting against fearful odds." Well done Rifle Brigade!

"I am ninety-five, I am ninety-five,
But to keep single I'll contrive."

'To keep *quiet* I wish *you'd* contrive,' muttered Mr. Buddlecombe, in a voice tremulous with suppressed feeling.

'That's the quick march of the Rifle Brigade, Mrs. Buddlecombe; to which, as the old 95th, they marched so often in the Peninsula to death or glory,' said Mr. Bolitho, who then resumed, with increased fire, "'Bring up the guns! Up they come; splendidly led!" Ah, as the song says:

“They’re the boys as minds no noise,
Is the Royal Artilleree.”’

‘Don’t mind a noise, eh?’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, with a forced calmness. ‘Bolitho should join that corps. He’d be popular in it, I dare say.’

“The guns are in danger!”’ roared old Bolitho, quite unconscious in his excitement of Mr. Buddlecombe’s running commentary, and also becoming a little ‘mixed’ in his declamation. “Highlanders, to the rescue! Scots wha hae wi’ Willie brew’d a peck o’ maut. True to their glorious traditions, the men grasp their gleaming pibrochs; the officers wave their trusty philibegs over their heads; while high above the din of battle rise the wild notes of the sporran. Glorious! Glorious!” Hoop-là! Bother it; I mean Hoot, mon! “A cheer rings along the line; and on come the splendid fellows to the soul-stirring sound of their bagpipes.” Hieland Laddie.’

And here old Bolitho actually vented his enthusiasm by an imitation of the bagpipes. The effect on Mr. Buddlecombe was fearful. He sprang to his feet, dashed his newspaper down for the third time, strode up to Bolitho, planted himself in front of that worthy, and

poured forth the following with a terrific volubility, which went like the rush of a torrent :

‘Bolitho ! *Bo*-litho ! we were boys together ; we knuckled down tight together ; we flew the garter together ; we fought together ; we have grown up together ; we have grown grey together. Consequently you are on those terms of intimacy with me which permit you to do pretty nearly what you like in my house. But I must draw the line somewhere. And I draw it at imitations of the national music of Scotland. *That’s* a thing which *no* one could stand who hadn’t been weaned on Glenlivat whisky ; and I happen to have subsisted for the first few months of my existence on a somewhat milder beverage.’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed Mr. Bolitho. ‘Brought up by hand, I should think, on a nice mild little mixture of cayenne-pepper, petroleum, and gun-cotton.’

‘What *are* you to do with such a rhinoceros-hided old buffoon?’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, turning on his heel with an air of the deepest disgust.

‘Well, well, we shan’t quarrel about it, Buddle, my boy,’ said Mr. Bolitho, soothingly ; ‘you say we fought together as young boys.

Well, we won't as old ones. But for the life of me, I can't recollect that particular fight.'

'O yes, we had, though, Bolitho,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as if he had not the slightest intention of allowing his laurels to be snatched from him. 'O yes, we had, and I whopped you. That was the term we used in those days—*whopped*. I mayn't go strutting about blowing trumpets and beating drums, and waving flags as *your* heroes do; but nevertheless I whopped you, Bolitho, and, what's more, you admitted yourself vanquished.'

'Very well, so be it,' said old Bolitho, laughing. 'History repeats itself, and I give in again. It always pleases him,' added the hearty old fellow aside; 'I think he must have dreamed it.'

'Hush! listen,' said Florence softly, as Mr. Buddlecombe bustled off on a fourth attempt to read his newspaper. 'I think I hear the band.'

'I don't hear anything,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'Neither do I,' said old Bolitho.

'Yes; I *do* hear it,' said Florence, getting as pale as a lily and holding up a finger.

Then Mrs. Buddlecombe and Mr. Bolitho

each held up a finger and stood intently listening, while Mr. Buddlecombe, who had now once more intrenched himself behind his *Times*, glared over the top of his paper parapet at them with savage contempt.

Florence was right. Love may be blind, but it can hear uncommonly well. Faintly, but unmistakably, the strains of a military band playing a quick march, mingled with the hoarse sound of distant cheering, fell on their listening ears.

‘Yes, there they are, just leaving the station!’ said old Bolitho, excitedly. ‘We shall only just have time to get down to the lodge and settle ourselves comfortably before they pass. Come along, Mrs. Buddlecombe. Come along, Florry.’

And before Florry had time to answer or offer any resistance, her eccentric old godfather snatched up the huge bouquet with one hand, seized her round the waist with the other, and ran her through the French window.

For the fourth time was the newspaper dashed to the floor, and Mr. Buddlecombe rushed to the window.

‘Florence! Come back, miss!’ he shouted. ‘If you so much as dare even to look—O, she’s

gone! She's clean off with that detonating old dotard!

And here Mr. Buddlecombe re-entered the room in a towering passion, and confronted his wife on her way to the open window.

'Joshua,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, arresting her footsteps, and speaking in calm, collected, and forcible tones, 'you betray a deplorable want of tact and knowledge of human nature. If you are anxious to predispose your daughter favourably towards these young officers; if, in plain language, you want her to fall over head and ears in love with the first one she sees, you are, by abusing them, going exactly the right way to work. I speak from experience. I'm sure I never felt so much inclined to fall in love with you as when my sainted and prophetic mother—*prophetic*, Joshua, I use the term advisedly—as when my *prophetic* mother said she was quite convinced you would turn out a perfect brute.'

Having poured this raking broadside into her consort, Mrs. Buddlecombe swept majestically from the room, and as she stepped out on to the veranda, looked over her shoulder with a beaming smile, and sweetly warbled :

“ Oh, isn't he a darling,
The brave soldier-boy ! ”

For several moments the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton stood in the centre of the room completely dumbfounded.

‘There,’ he at last exclaimed to an attentive congregation of furniture, ‘there’s the effect of the military! For nearly a quarter of a century have Georgina and I hit it off with tolerable tranquillity. We have certainly had a protracted struggle for supremacy of many years’ duration, but we have not, as a rule, if ever, descended to personal abuse. On the bare approach of the military, however, she becomes rampagious, calls me a brute, and sings an improper song. “O, isn’t he a darling,” indeed! There they go, the noisome noisy brood, turning this once pure and peaceful Puddleton into a pandemonium!’

This last alliterative sentence referred to the strains of the band, which during the above had been getting louder and louder, until now in a rich wave of sound they broke upon Mr. Buddlecombe’s ears. Mingling with the music were the cheers of the crowd and the peals of joy-bells from many a church-steeple.

‘O, isn’t that enough to drive anyone in his senses out of them!’ ejaculated Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘Are these legalised and caressed

assassins and cut-throats to be allowed thus to turn the beautiful harmony of Puddleton's existence into this abominable discord? Not if I can help it. No military man shall ever darken *my* door with his presence, or may I be——'

Here most opportunely a sudden apparition at the open window diverted Mr. Buddlecombe's thoughts. It was that of a man, all in white from head to foot, enthusiastically waving a ladle over his head.

'*Vive la gloire!*' shouted the man in white, with his eyes starting out of his head. '*Vive ze allies of la France! Vive Napoléon! En avant! Peep-peep-purée!*'

And with one final frantic wave of his ladle, he dashed on to join the throng of spectators, wildly vociferating, '*Peep-peep-purée!*' which there are some grounds for believing was an attempt at an English cheer.

'Dear me! that's my new French cook,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, quite taken aback for a few moments. 'Hi!' he shouted, as he recovered himself and rushed to the window; 'hi! I say! *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas* what you're paid your salary for, *mong garson!*'

It is hardly necessary to add that this had not the slightest effect ; and Mr. Buddlecombe was returning once more to his chair, with a superhuman effort at resignation, when a housemaid ran past the window, brandishing a dustpan and shrilly shouting :

‘Three cheers for the soldiers ! ’Ip-’ip-’ip-’ooray !’

‘One month’s warning from this day, you shrieking Jezebel !’ shouted Mr. Buddlecombe from the window.

Then a footman ran past cheering, and at him the worshipful gentleman felt desperately inclined to hurl an adjacent *ormolu* ornament ; then a scullerymaid, waving a duster, and shouting :

‘Down with the perlice ! The milingtary for ever !’

‘O, do you know, if this sort of thing goes on,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, in tones of blank despair, ‘the whole house will be converted into a lunatic asylum, and I shall enjoy the luxury of a strait-waistcoat and a padded cell all to myself. I—I—I feel at this moment that if it wasn’t for my naturally phlegmatic and calm disposition I should break down under the mental strain.’

So saying, Mr. Buddlecombe was just about to take a seat, when an obsequious individual of between fifty and sixty years of age, in a swallow-tailed coat and pepper-and-salt trousers, entered the room with a deference that was almost abject. This was Mr. Spigot, the butler.

‘Why don’t *you* go and cheer, Spigot?’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, with grim irony.

‘No, your worship,’ replied Spigot, who was quite aware of his master’s antipathy to the army. ‘I have taken the liberty of coming to convince your worship by my presence that I wouldn’t demean myself by doing so. I don’t approve of the military, your worship. Far from it. The only good I know of soldiers is, that they’re a bit of a hantidote to the police. When a young girl forms a hopeless attachment for a policeman, she cures herself by falling in love with a soldier. That’s the only good *I* know of soldiers, and that, your worship, is a recommendation I don’t think worth going and hollering myself hoarse over.’

‘Spigot,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, warmly, ‘you have proved yourself worthy of the position of trust which you hold,’

‘Thank you, your worship,’ said the obsequious Spigot; and with a low bow he withdrew.

‘I wonder what abominable folly my wife and daughter, under the leadership of that elderly buffoon Bolitho, are up to,’ thought Mr. Buddlecombe, as he went to the window, and looked out. ‘Hullo! what do I see?’ he exclaimed, starting with indignation. ‘Georgina, in the character of Beauty, is about to “crown Valour,” and is preparing to throw the bouquet at the Colonel with all that elaboration of gesture peculiar to the feminine method of taking a shot! Georgina, you’re disgracing——’

What had happened? The band stopped playing in evident confusion—the first instrument to give in being the big drum and the last the piccolo, which on such occasions always *will* have the last squeak. At the same time Mr. Buddlecombe’s demeanour underwent a startling change. In the midst of a most scathing denunciation of his wife’s conduct, his contracted brow relaxed, and he burst into a loud laugh. He held his sides; he smote first one leg and then the other; he rocked himself backwards and forwards, and he

laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks. The shortest way to enlighten the reader, who is no doubt eager to trace this extraordinary effect to its cause, is to give the spasmodic utterances which escaped the worshipful gentleman himself in a series of gasps and wheezes and chuckles.

‘O dear, she crowned Valour with a vengeance ! She’s hit the Colonel’s charger over the head with her bouquet, and he’s reared up, and then put his near off-leg, or whatever they call it, through the big drum. And the whole procession is thrown into confusion. And old Joe Bolitho, who has rushed through the lodge-gates to apologise, is falling a victim to popular indignation. O, delicious ! Yes, I’ll cheer ; I’ll cheer *now* !’

And standing on tip-toes at the window, Mr. Buddlecombe put his hand to the side of his mouth, and gave vent to his feelings.

‘Hooray ! hooray ! Go it ! Give it to old Bolitho ! He’s always at his practical jokes ! He did it on purpose ! Duck him in the horse-pond, and I’ll pay for any damage he does to the bottom ! Hooray !’

These ebullitions speedily brought Mr. Spigot on the scene again, aghast and alarmed.

‘Why, he’s gone off his worshipful chump!’ gasped the faithful old retainer, after standing for several moments in speechless astonishment; ‘and what with all his tantrums it’s my opinion he hadn’t very far to go.’

‘Come and cheer, Spigot,’ exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe, suddenly catching sight of him. ‘Come and cheer.’

‘Certainly, your worship.’

And Spigot, joining his master at the window, gave vent to a laboured ‘Hooray!’

‘Throw a little more derision into your cheers, Spigot,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, sharply. ‘You must remember they’re *derisive* cheers.’

‘Certainly, your worship. Hoo——’

‘O, get away!’ snapped Mr. Buddlecombe, relapsing into his former mood as suddenly as he had emerged from it, as, order having been restored, the band struck up again and the regiment moved on once more with a steady swing. ‘Be off with you!’

‘Certainly, your worship,’ said Spigot; adding, as he hurriedly sidled out of the room: ‘He turns sour as suddenly as a barrel of beer in a thunderstorm.’

‘Ridiculous nonsense all this drumming and trumpeting, only fit to impose upon a few

nurserymaids and weak-minded youths,' contemptuously ejaculated Mr. Buddlecombe, as he paced the room.

Nevertheless, he had not taken many turns when he became slightly influenced by the martial strains, and after a little he gradually and unconsciously assumed quite a military strut.

'Martial enthusiasm, indeed!' he continued. 'All stuff and nonsense. How ridiculous I should look pointing my toes and holding my head up in the air!'

With this last remark of his he became a striking instance of the difficulty we all experience in seeing ourselves as others see us, for holding up his head and pointing his toes was just the very thing he was doing as hard as he could.

'What senile folly, old soldiers fighting their battles over again! How can they be such old fools! I fought old Bolitho, though, when we were boys together. O yes, I did. And I licked him too! O yes, one doesn't go bragging about fighting, but still we're all there when we're put to it. Rather! I know an old idiot who is rather proud of having been at Waterloo. If that isn't false

pride, I don't know what is. How well I recollect my fight with Bolitho! But *he* doesn't. With a view to mitigating the horrors of war as much as possible, I stipulated, previous to the combat, that hitting in the face wasn't to be fair. At the second round Bolitho hit me what we called then a one-er—a *fearful* one-er on the nose. I didn't wait for a two-er; but, with the wonderful promptitude which has characterised all my actions in life, I took up a commanding position on the broad of my back, and from that coign of 'vantage dictated terms to the effect that I claimed the victory on the grounds of breach of contract. O yes! I mayn't go bragging about like Bolitho and these puppies in red coats, but I've got a spice of the fighting devil about me when my blood's up.'



PART II.

LOVE'S MANŒUVRE.



CHAPTER I.

DISCUSSING THE MAYOR.

THE Queen's Own Fusiliers speedily shook down in their new quarters ; and officers, non-commissioned officers and men, with a lively sense of the hearty welcome they had received from Puddleton, devoted themselves, in their several spheres, to the cultivation of that friendly intercourse with their civilian neighbours which a very high authority on military matters has laid down as a duty of the highest importance, incumbent on all ranks of the army during the piping times of peace.

Of course, after returning from active service leave was granted to as many as could possibly be spared, and the regiment was consequently

reduced to a skeleton ; but what was left of it fully upheld the regimental reputation for sociability and hospitality. Of all the guests bidden to the officers' mess old Joe Bolitho was the most honoured. There was a genuine heartiness about the old fellow that at once took them all by storm. He was not only hearty in manner, but also hearty in deed ; and for the first few days after the arrival of the regiment, until the officers' mess was open, his comfortable bachelor quarters were open morning, noon, and night for such of the officers as chose to breakfast, lunch, dine, or sleep under his hospitable roof.

One evening, within a week of the eventful morning so fully described in the preceding chapters, Mr. Bolitho sat in the anteroom at the barracks in the midst of a sociable little circle of Fusiliers. There had been other civilian guests at dinner ; but all had departed except Mr. Bolitho, and his broad-backed, old-fashioned swallow-tail was the only black coat in the room.

‘ Well,’ said Major Burstrap, a fine fat old veteran, who commanded the regiment in the absence of the Colonel on leave, ‘ your townsmen, Mr. Bolitho, are wonderfully civil and

attentive, with the exception, I must add, of your worshipful Mayor.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed old Bolitho. 'I'm afraid none of your cloth will get much civility and attention from my cantankerous old friend, Joshua Buddlecombe.'

'No, we don't expect it,' said an officer. 'We heard, directly we came here, that he was rabid against soldiers.'

'Rabid! I should think he was,' said Bolitho. 'Why, he called me a deadly upas-tree, blighting the innocence of his daughter, a few days ago, merely because I happened to mention something about the regiment in her presence. Ha, ha, ha! But, bless you, I don't mind what names he calls me, for we were boys together.'

'By Jove! what an awfully pretty girl the daughter is!' said Lieutenant Spoonbill.

'Why, where on earth did you see her?' asked Mr. Bolitho, in considerable astonishment; 'for, to my certain knowledge, she has not been allowed outside the grounds ever since you marched in, and a pretty good piece of my mind have I given old Buddlecombe on the subject.'

'Oh, we saw her yesterday,' replied Spoon-

bill, 'from the top of the regimental drag over the high garden-wall, as we drove past. She was walking along reading a letter, and when she looked up she did more execution in our ranks, by Jove, than the Russians ever did. The only one who didn't seem hit was Warriner, who was sitting next to me.'

'Ah, Warriner, my boy,' said old Bolitho, with a kind and admiring glance at a handsome young fellow with his right arm in a sling, 'Cupid, after all, is more discriminating and generous than I gave the young rogue credit for. He remembers you have been badly hit already in the service of his father, Mars, and he aims his shafts elsewhere.'

'Yes, I suppose that's it,' said young Warriner, carelessly, 'and I'm sure I'm much obliged to his impship for his forbearance.'

'Or is it the memory of another's charms, my dear boy, that renders you invulnerable?' said old Bolitho. '"So faithful in love and so dauntless in war," eh? Is that your case, Warriner?'

There was a kindness in the old man's *badinage*, which, together with the difference in the ages of himself and Warriner, cleansed it of all offensiveness, and the young man,

who most assuredly would have resented such a liberty from any other stranger, allowed the old fellow's remark to pass with a shrug of the shoulders and a good-natured smile.

'I am told,' said old Major Burstrap, who, having arrived at that age when the seat of the affections seems to take a downward direction, was anxious to change the conversation into a channel more congenial to the promptings of his heart, 'I am told that the Mayor has a first-rate French cook.'

Old Bolitho turned his eyes up, heaved a deep sigh, and stroked his waistcoat. The eloquence of this beautiful pantomime was not lost upon Major Burstrap.

'And I am told, too, the best port in the county ; is that the case ?' he continued, with visible emotion.

Old Bolitho again sighed and murmured, 'Wonderful, wonderful !'

'Really, it is a thousand pities,' said Major Burstrap, in a beautiful spirit of Christian meekness, 'that this unfortunate antipathy to us should be allowed to exist a day longer. It makes one feel positively uncomfortable to know that we are objects of such undying rancour. One so seldom, nowadays, comes

across really good port, that—— Dear me, I mean it is our duty as Christian gentlemen to do everything in our power to remove this impression. That was what I was going to say, when you so unceremoniously interrupted me, Smithers.'

'I didn't say anything, Major,' replied little Ensign Smithers, very meekly.

'No; but you *looked* as if you were going to, and that is quite as disconcerting—more so, in fact. Don't do it again, my dear fellow.'

'Very well, sir.'

'That's right,' said the fat old Major, with touching forgiveness. 'Now, Mr. Bolitho, don't you think you could act as peacemaker between your worthy Mayor and ourselves?'

'When oil and vinegar amalgamate, but not until then, I fear,' replied old Bolitho. 'Nothing short of a miracle will ever alter his opinion of you. I know him well, for we were boys together. He would as soon think of asking a rattlesnake to his table as one of your distinguished profession.'

'One wouldn't care a rap, you know, if it wasn't that he had such a pretty daughter,' said Lieutenant Spoonbill.

'And such a beautiful cook,' added Major

Burstrap. 'Dear me, there you are again, Smithers, throwing me completely off what I intended to say.'

'I really did not even *look* as if I was going to speak this time, Major,' expostulated the meek little Smithers.

'No; I know you didn't; but that's just where it is. I felt you were belying your looks. Now do exercise a little more self-control, my dear fellow.'

'Very well, sir.'

'That's right. Now, Mr. Bolitho, can nothing be done to convince your worthy Mayor that we are respectable members of society?'

'Nothing, Major. He's a confirmed lunatic on that point.'

It being now very late, old Bolitho tore himself away from the pleasant company with considerable difficulty. As he walked home he thus soliloquised:

'I tell you what, it's just as well my little god-daughter Florry won't have a chance of seeing that young fellow Algernon Warriner. My heart warms to the good-looking plucky youngster. What an old ass Josh Buddle is!'



CHAPTER II.

AN EVENTFUL HALF-HOUR.

EVER since the introduction of the French cook, it was Mr. Buddlecombe's custom, when not dining from home, to repair in the evening about half an hour before the dinner-time to his snug library, opposite the dining-room, there to con over the *menu* with the assistance of Florence, who knew a little more French than he did. 'For,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, 'I always like to look before I leap.'

In conformity with this rule, Florence was at her post one evening about three weeks after the Queen's Own Fusiliers took Puddleton by storm.

'Dear me,' she exclaimed, as she entered the

room, charmingly dressed for dinner, and glanced at the clock over the mantelpiece; 'how early I am! Papa won't be here for a little yet. I shall have time for just another read.'

Taking from the bosom of her dress a letter which she kissed rapturously, Florence broke into a dreamy monologue:

'O, if papa only knew that ever since the regiment arrived here I have been in regular communication with Algy through the postal medium of a crack in the garden-wall! and that we have spoken lots of times! If papa only knew it, I wonder what he'd do! As to mamma, she thinks Algernon perfection; but she says she would never run counter to papa's wishes, and he is, if possible, more rabid than ever against the army and everyone connected with it. Mamma has certainly made a concession. "Florry," she said, "when I see Mr. Warriner a guest at your father's table by your father's own invitation, I promise you faithfully I shall throw all my weight"—and that's saying a great deal in mamma's case—"into your cause." But I'm afraid mamma only said that because she knew the conditions were utterly impossible. Though if we could only

get her on our side success would be merely a question of time, I believe ; for with all papa's bluster he generally gives in to mamma in the long-run. I'm afraid this would be a very long run, though. I told all this to Algy, and his letter to me to-day nearly takes my breath away O, what mad folly is he contemplating ? I'll just have one more read :

‘ “ DARLING FLORRY,

“ I have been thinking over what your mother has said about never countenancing our engagement until I am a bidden guest at your father's table. Now, my dear little Florry, where there's a will there's a way, and I mean to dine with you and your esteemed parent, the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton, this very evening. That capital old fellow, Mr. Bolitho, tells me he dines with you to-night, so we shall be quite a pleasant little party. You say you are quite sure your mother will keep her promise ; and with her on our side we shall be over the stiffest fence, with nothing before us but comparatively plain-going.

‘ “ Your devoted and loving

“ ALGERNON.”

‘Mean to dine with us to-night! O, what mad impracticable scheme can Algy be contemplating? I’m afraid his heart has quite run away with his head. How I wish I could communicate with him, and implore him to give up this insane project! But, of course, our *poste restante*, the crack in the garden-wall, won’t be called at. What *can* he mean? He surely can’t intend to obtrude himself by force! O no! In the first place, Algernon is too much of a gentleman for that; and in the second, it would not be fulfilling the conditions, for that would not be by papa’s invitation. O, I know; he’s going to dress up as a woman. No; that can’t be it. He would look such a monster in petticoats that he couldn’t escape detection. And then he couldn’t, O, he couldn’t have the heart to shave off that lovely moustache! O Algy, Algy, what an agonising state of perplexity you have thrown your loving Florry into! And to think, too, I shall have to meet papa in a few moments with a smiling countenance and a composed manner to read over that abominable *menu* to him! What sacrilege, reading a bill of fare after Algy’s letter! I shall just have time for *one* more read of the precious note:

‘ “Darling Florry——”

‘ O no, I shan’t. Good gracious, here’s papa coming down the stairs !’

* * * * *

Mr. Buddlecombe was no exception to the general rule that every man has two sides to his nature. The one first presented to the reader happened to be the rough side ; but, as already stated, or rather implied, Mr. Buddlecombe had a smooth one, and it is now the pleasanter task of the chronicler to show our worshipful Mayor *this* side uppermost.

Between the gentle zephyr coquetting with a weathercock until the shy old stupid doesn’t know which way to turn, and rude Boreas uprooting trees, dismasting ships, and unroofing houses, there is not a greater difference than between Mr. Buddlecombe as he is now about to appear, and Mr. Buddlecombe as the reader last saw him, dashing his newspaper on the floor, giving his servants warning all round, railing at the defenders of his country, abusing the friend of his youth, storming at the wife of his bosom, and fiercely

hurling at his innocent offspring such epithets as 'prattling idiot' and 'babbling booby.'

It has been deemed advisable to offer these preliminary remarks, as the reader would not otherwise recognise Mr. Buddlecombe in the dapper beaming old gentleman who now entered his own snug library, resplendent in a snowy shirt-front, white waistcoat, glossy pumps—in short, dressed for dinner. It is common to most fidgety old gentlemen to become happy and docile *after* dinner; but Mr. Buddlecombe had lately, by taking a leaf from Akenside's 'Pleasures of Imagination,' hit upon a method of snatching an *ante-prandial* dream of joy from life's fitful sleep.

'Ah, little Florrikins,' he said, on entering the room, this mode of address, if frivolous for a Mayor, being still a marked as well as remarkable improvement on 'babbling booby,' 'it was a bright idea that reading over the *maynoo* together every evening before dinner, wasn't it, you saucy little puss?'

'Yes, papa dear, a very bright idea,' acquiesced Florence; adding aside, with a surreptitious pout, 'Horrible sacrilege, reading a nasty bill of fare after Algy's sweet letter!'

'And here in this nice little room, replete

with every comfort, we are always secure from interruption,' continued Mr. Buddlecombe, beaming all round him. 'The half-hour immediately preceding dinner is usually the heaviest period of the day, but *noos avong shongshay toot cela*. How the possession of a French cook does brush up one's French, to be sure ! One seems to be, as it were, absorbing the language into one's very system. It is certainly a delightful way of acquiring a foreign tongue, and is immeasurably superior to Ollendorf's method : "Do you love the white hat of the virtuous chimney-sweeper ?" "No ; because my grandmother has eaten the green parasol of the magnanimous cabinet-maker." That was the style of thing I used to hear you at with your governess, eh, Florry ?

'Yes, papa dear.'

'We spend this half-hour very pleasantly together in the calm joys of anticipation, don't we, little Florry ?' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as he playfully chuckled his daughter under the chin, and then took his seat in an arm-chair.

'Yes, papa dear,' acquiesced Florence ; adding aside, as she seated herself on a low stool by her father's chair, 'To *me* this half-hour

to-night will be the most trying I have ever passed.'

'I have considerably enhanced the pleasures of the evening by abstaining from lunch lately,' chuckled Mr. Buddlecombe; 'for, as the poet sweetly observes, "Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder"' (patting the lower portion of his waistcoat)—'fond foolish heart!'

'*Absence*, papa dear, the poet said; not *abstinence*,' remarked Florence.

'Well, darling, it's all the same,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, patting his daughter's golden head with a tender playfulness. 'By absence he of course meant absence from a meal; and what is that but abstinence? Ah, Florry, Florry, you matter-of-fact little puss, you've no soul for poetry.'

'O, how I wish papa would look at Algy in the light of a *pâté de foie gras* or a Périgord pie!' sighed Florence, as she turned to the table for the *menu*.

'Now, Florry,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, leaning back in his chair, crossing his legs, and bringing the tips of his fingers together, 'commence, my dear. And, Florry, read, you know, as they say in your music-books, *con espressione*, *con MOLTO espressione*, my child.'

‘What a dreadful old *gourmand* this French cook is turning papa into!’ murmured Florence behind the *menu*. ‘His voice is actually trembling with emotion, and he’s turning his eyes up as if he were saying his prayers!’

‘Go on, Florence, and pay great attention to your elocution, my dear.’

‘*Potages*,’ began Florence, in resigned tones.

‘*Potages*,’ softly echoed Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘*Tortue claire*.’

‘*Tortoo claire*: Clear turtle. Very good.’

‘And *consommé de volaille aux quenelles*.’

‘*Congsomay de*—I say, Florry, that’s a stumper. What does it mean?’

‘I don’t know exactly, papa dear.’

‘Neither do I. It will be a pleasant surprise, no doubt. It sounds delicious.’

‘*Poissons*.’

‘*Poisson*: Fish. Good.’

‘*Turbôt, sauce Hollandaise; saumon racolé à la Tartare*.’

‘Aha, that’s the Tartar I like catching,’ gently interpolated Mr. Buddlecombe, with a soft smile.

‘*Entrées*.’

‘*Ongray*: Come in. Come in, by all

means,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, with a playful and peculiar significance, as he tapped a waistcoat button.

'Suprême de volaille aux truffes; filets de pigeons de Bordeaux; purée aux champignons.'

'Read that again, Florry,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, in tones of gentle ecstasy; '*ongcore, ongcure*, my sweet child. It falls softly and soothingly on the ear like evening bells—dinner-bells.'

Resignedly Florence acceded to the *encore*.

'What a b-e-aautiful language French is! it appeals so to the heart,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, again laying his hand tenderly on the lower portion of his waistcoat. 'Proceed, little blue-eyed sweetener of my existence.'

'Tête de Veau au Maire de Puddleton——'

'Stop a moment, darling! That claims a few words of acknowledgment from me. Now really, *could* there be a more delicate compliment conveyed with a more delicious delicacy than that?' murmured Mr. Buddlecombe, his countenance luminous under this adroit touch of French polish. 'Most truly is a Frenchman one of nature's noblemen. Go on, little golden-locks.'

'Côtelettes de mouton à l'Anglaise—well, I

suppose in plain language that's mutton-chops,' said Florence.

'Silence, carrot-head!' ejaculated Mr. Buddlecombe, starting as if something sharper than a serpent's tooth had bitten him. 'Of all coarse brutes a Frenchman is the worst. I'll back him to go the whole *cochon*, against any living creature.'

'O, of course, I recollect the romantic episode of the mutton-chops and the mastiff,' muttered Florence *sotto voce*, as she turned away her head to conceal a smile.

'Ring the bell, Florence,' said Mr. Buddlecombe; adding aside, 'I must take something to wash down that disagreeable reminiscence.'

Florence rose, rang the bell, and resumed her seat.

'I did think,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, tapping the carpet furiously with one foot, 'I *did* think that when I had a French cook I should not have such things as mutton-chops for dinner. Or if such an abomination as a mutton-chop *were* presented at my table, it would have been so disguised that its own sheep would not have known it. But *à l'Ongray* evidently means the article in all its normal repulsiveness of gristle and fat. O, you know, the fellow ought to

have his salary cut down to that of a major-general, or whatever those old cut-throats in cocked hats call themselves.'

At this point the obsequious Spigot entered the room in response to Florence's summons.

'Spigot, sherry and bitters. And look sharp!' said Mr. Buddlecombe.

'Certainly, your worship,' said Spigot, hastily withdrawing.

'Good gracious!' thought Florence, with a fearful sinking at heart; 'if such a trifle puts him out in this way, what will he do, O what *will* he do when the announcement, which may be made at any moment, that an officer from the barracks is actually in the house, breaks rudely in upon his dreams of *tortue claire* and *volaille aux truffes*?'

Fortunately—for the present at all events—the oil—in the shape of sherry and bitters—which was to be poured on the troubled waters of Mr. Buddlecombe's soul speedily arrived; and with the first sip he became not only calm, but even placid.

'Well, well,' he remarked, without the least signs of the recent passion, which had come and passed with the suddenness of a Mediterranean squall, 'there is no rose without a

thorn, and no *maynoo*, I suppose, without a bitter pill. Now go on, Florry; *con molto espressione*, don't forget that, my child.'

'*Relevés : Chapons rôtis au Périgord.*'

'Good again. Capons roasted as they do them at Périgord. By the way, Périgord is a town in France, is it not? You learned geography last, Florry'

'Yes, papa, a town in the east of France, I think; famed for the manufacture of raised pies.'

'Yes, yes, yes, to be sure. Raised pies! what an elevated form of industry! Go on little sunbeam.'

'*Hanche de venaison aux——*'

'Hush, Florence. You read that over a *lectle* too hurriedly—I might almost say irreverently. We have now arrived, so to speak, at the very zenith of the cook's efforts, and we should not treat the same in a spirit of levity. *This is the way——*'

Here the Mayor extended his hand ready for emphasis, turned up his eyes, cleared his throat, and was just on the point of showing his daughter how to render rhetorical justice to 'the very zenith of the cook's efforts,' when Spigot entered the room, and threw the following metaphorical bomb-shell at his worship's feet:

‘A gentleman wants to see your worship immediately on a pressing matter of business.’

‘Heavens!’ mentally ejaculated Florence, as she dropped the tiresome bill of fare, and clasped her hands; ‘this must be Algy! Madness!’

‘Wants to see me at this hour?’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, furiously. ‘Didn’t you tell him I was engaged, Spigot?’

‘I did, your worship; but he wouldn’t go,’ replied Spigot, glancing in astonishment at his young mistress, and wondering what on earth Miss Florence was tearing her pretty little lace handkerchief to pieces for.

‘Wouldn’t go!’ said Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘And I do wish to goodness, Spigot, that *you* wouldn’t go rolling about your eyes in that way. Keep those ocular demonstrations till you’ve got a fit yourself, or want to frighten an old woman into one.’

‘Certainly, your worship,’ replied the meek Spigot, fixing his master with a winkless glare until his eyes watered.

‘Who is it?’ asked Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘Who dares to come at this hour when—— Don’t stare like a stuck pig, Spigot!’

‘Certainly not, your worship. I—I—I think,

if you please, your worship, it's—it's—it's—a—a——'

'Do *not* stammer, Spigot. There are few things more irritating to a listener than stammering; and irritation just before a meal is to be specially avoided. It plays the deuce with the gastric juices. Who is it?'

'Well, your most worshipful worship,' faltered Spigot, surreptitiously laying hold of the door-handle behind him as a first step to a hasty retreat should circumstances necessitate one, 'it's a gent from the barracks, your worship!'

'An individual from the barracks! wants to see *me*!' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe, jumping up; while Florence, trembling from head to foot, seized a book, opened it upside down, and pretended to be absorbed in its contents.

'Such is his outrageous request, your worship. Here's his card.'

'Why didn't you give it to me before?' said Mr. Buddlecombe, snatching the small piece of pasteboard.

'Well, knowing your worship's dislike to the military, I thought it best not to be too sudden in the announcement, your worship,' explained Spigot, while his master adjusted his glasses.

“Mr. Algernon Fitzmaurice Warriner, the Queen’s Own Fusiliers,” said Mr. Buddlecombe, reading the superscription on the card, which he held at arm’s length and surveyed with upturned nose, as if it were something noxious and nasty. ‘Now what, in the name of wonder, can Mr. Algernon Fitzmaurice Warriner, of the Queen’s Own Slaughterers, or whatever they call themselves, want with me? What, in the wildest flights of the human fancy, can Mr. Algernon Fitzmaurice Warriner of the Queen’s Own Brain-spatterers, and the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton, be supposed to have in common?’

‘I can see papa is working himself up into one of his paroxysms of rage,’ murmured the pale trembling little Florence, as, with her head still bent over the reversed book, she anxiously gazed through her long lashes at her excitable parent. ‘With his violent temper there may be murder. I’ll remove everything that might offer itself to his hand as a weapon.’

And in this very merciful spirit of precaution Florence, watching her opportunities, succeeded in pocketing, one after another, such

deadly engines of carnage as a paper-knife, a pair of scissors, and a bodkin.

‘How *can* people be so reckless as to leave such things about!’ whimpered Florence, as she pounced on the last, and pocketed it as if it had been what bodkins used to be in Shakespeare’s time, a dagger with which anyone tired of life ‘might his quietus make,’ or any other man’s. ‘It’s positively murder made easy.’

While Florence’s hands were thus busily engaged, Mr. Buddlecombe’s tongue was not idle.

‘I call this invasion of my privacy an outrage, a brutal outrage. Is he sober, Spigot?’

‘Well, as sober, your worship, as can be expected from the military. Leastways, he conducts hisself with tolerable propriety considering.’

‘I’m astonished at it. Is he in his senses, then?’

‘Well, in as much as he’s got, I should imagine, your worship; but I don’t suppose soldiers has got much in their heads, or they wouldn’t go trying to stop cannon-balls and bullets with them.’

‘Gracious!’ mentally ejaculated Florence, with a shudder, ‘there’s the poker, papa’s favourite weapon, I should think! I *must* have it. I dare say I’ll be able to get hold of it and hide it while papa is engaged with that cringing old sycophant.’

‘Where did you leave him, Spigot?’ asked Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘Well, knowing your worship’s very proper antipathy to the military, I left him on the doorstep, your worship.’

‘Old wretch!’ muttered Florence, with a contemptuous glance at Spigot, as she sidled towards the fender.

‘And a very proper place too, Spigot. And did you shut the door?’

‘I did, your worship.’

‘In his face?’

‘*Right* in his face, your worship.’

‘With a bang?’

‘With a most fearful bang, your worship.’

‘Spigot, you may have your faults, but I must say there *are* occasions when you evince a great deal of delicate tact, and this is pre-eminently one of them. I do not say that if you had kicked him down the steps you would not have exhibited in a still higher degree

your command of that rare and ethereal attribute ; but we cannot expect—— Florence, what *are* you trying to do with that poker ?

For a moment or two poor Florence was completely scared, and stood, mute and motionless, with the article in question behind her back, where she had whisked it just too late to evade her parent's vision.

‘O, it’s—it’s—it’s such a pretty poker, pa,’ she at last stammered out, with all the futile desperation of a drowning man clutching at a straw. ‘I was thinking it would make such a——such a sweet ornament for my *châteline*. Will you’—and here she placed her hands on his shoulders and looked coaxingly up into his face—‘will you give it to me, papa dear?’

A strange unnatural calm, such as sudden and extreme bewilderment occasionally produces even on the most excitable temperaments, came over Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘Does history furnish any records of insane Mayors?’ he gloomily asked, while Florence, with the poker still clasped in her hand, continued to hang on to his shoulders. ‘Or is it reserved for me to figure as the first on that mournful list? I wonder, if I go mad during my Mayoralty, whether they’ll present me

with a silver straitjacket? Here's my only child, on whose education no expense has been spared, and who has hitherto betrayed no marked symptoms of idiocy, nor any special mania for fire-irons, beseeching me in tender and imploring accents to "give her the pretty poker, pa;" while simultaneously a member of the windpipe-slitting brain-spattering profession called the army drops in at the sacred hour of dinner, just for all the world as if I were dotingly fond of the species. It's really enough—— Here, get away with you! Put that poker down at once, Florence, and go up to your mother! Do you hear me? Put that poker in its right place, miss. Well, if you won't, I will.'

Snatching the poker from Florence, who at once began to cry, Mr. Buddlecombe excitedly threw it into the half-open drawer of the library-table, near which he was standing.

'There,' said he, as he closed the drawer with a bang. 'I'm the only one in the whole house who has got a head in an emergency, and keeps cool and collected. Go to your mother, Florence.'

'I can't leave them alone together,' sobbed Florence, as she moved towards the door,

pouring her muffled plaint into a diminutive bundle of rags which ten minutes before had been a dainty little lace handkerchief. 'I'll go out, and then slip back behind that screen ; and if Algy *does* come in, and papa makes a murderous onslaught upon him with the poker, I'll rush between them and receive the death-blow on my own head.'

This last beautiful sentiment was nearly choked with sobs.

'It's impossible this individual can have any business with me,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as soon as the door had closed on Florence.

'Quite, your worship,' said Spigot, whose anxiety to tell his master that he had put the poker into the table-drawer was restrained by a dread amounting almost to a certainty that he, the informant, would have it thrown at his head for his pains if he did so.

'It is some impertinent attempt at a vulgar practical joke. I shan't see him. Tell him to go about his business—that's to say, if a military man *has* business anywhere.'

'Yes, your worship.'

'Here, take back his card. Say I don't want it. Now, where the deuce did I put it? I must have dropped it in this drawer ; I re-

collect it was open. He may keep—— Now *do* look where Florence has put that poker; in the drawer, actually, of my writing-table, amongst all my papers! Could anyone believe that a girl on whose education no expense has been spared could be so giddy? Confound the poker, and the card too! Here, tell the individual on the doorstep to go away.'

'Yes, your worship,' said Spigot, retiring.

'Here, Spigot.'

'Your worship.'

'You may put it rather stronger than that. Tell him to go to the—— You understand, Spigot.'

'Perfectly, your worship.'

'Stay a moment, Spigot. You are an old and faithful retainer of the family.'

'I am indeed, your worship.'

'At an early age, when a factory boy, you narrowly escaped being worked up into buttons, through being caught in the machinery.'

'Had I been, your worship, I trust that as buttons I should not have disgraced the firm.'

The Mayor of Puddleton was visibly touched.

'And I do further trust, you worship, that

I should not have been military buttons, nor had any device or motto of a warlike nature stamped upon me.'

'O, do you know,' said the Mayor, quite carried away by this last, 'a person capable of such beautiful sentiments, no matter how far-fetched, must not be sacrificed to military brutality. No, Spigot, I shall not expose you to the risk of delivering that message. It would probably lead to your being knocked down and trampled upon.'

'I should be proud of falling in your worship's service.'

'No; I prefer your standing up for me. Tell this individual to go away, and that if he *has* any business with me he can communicate it by letter to my office to-morrow morning. And further, impress upon him the utter hopelessness of any attempt on his part to obtain even a *transient* view of me this evening, much less an *interview*.'

'Very good, your worship.'

Sporting reader, I here pause at the conclusion of this chapter to ask you, in the language of the betting-ring, what odds you are prepared to lay against the successful termina-


tion of Algernon Warriner's design of dining this very evening with the Mayor of Puddleton, by that civic worthy's own invitation?





CHAPTER III.

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS.

‘ DO you know, one’s digestive organs are completely upset by this affair,’ testily remarked the Mayor, as Spigot withdrew, adding, in a querulous whine, ‘I haven’t half the appetite I had. I’ll try and coax it back.’

With this object in view, Mr. Buddlecombe reseated himself in his armchair, adjusted his double glasses, took up the *menu*, and addressed himself to the perusal of that entrancing schedule. The effect was apparently most soothing. With the first anticipatory spoonful of the *tortue claire*, grim-visaged war smoothed its wrinkled front, and his brow became as clear as the turtle; and when in

fancy he partook of the *saumon*, it might be, but *he* was not, *à la Tartare*. There was nothing of the fierce Tartar nature about him then.

While he was thus absorbed, the door was noiselessly opened, and, with a mouse-like foot-fall, Florence entered and ensconced herself behind a large screen, whose duty was to shield the Mayor of Puddleton from the public gaze when he condescended to be mortal, and wished to wash his hands without the trouble of going upstairs. Of course this clandestine proceeding was the first step towards the fulfilment of Florence's expressed intention of receiving the death-blow on her own devoted little head, should her father make a murderous onslaught with his favourite weapon, the poker, on the gallant but rash Algernon Warriner.

Florence had only just settled herself in her hiding-place, and Mr. Buddlecombe's spirit had once more gloriously soared to the 'zenith of the cook's efforts,' *alias* the haunch of venison, when the door was again opened, and Spigot entered with the demeanour of a criminal on his way to the scaffold.

'If you please, your worship, it's not my fault, your most worshipful worship,' faltered Spigot.

‘What’s not your fault?’ asked Mr. Buddlecombe, with the deepest anxiety; ‘has anything happened to the dinner!’

‘O no, nothing quite so fearfully awful as that, your worship.’

The Mayor breathed again.

‘I really thought,’ he murmured, with that fluttering of spirit, half painful, half joyous, which generally betokens the only half-realised immunity from some suddenly threatened calamity, ‘that the cook had had a fit, just at the critical moment when the *congsomay* or the *sooprane de volatile* most needed his delicate attention.’

‘It’s the young officer, your worship.’

The Mayor started, and in spirit, if not in word, he went as near an oath as a Mayor’s pure spirit can go.

‘He’s the most impertinacious creature I ever came across, your worship. He says he particularly wants to see your worship.’

‘Does he? Well, well, perhaps it is pardonable on his part. Tell him I occasionally drive through the main street on my way to the courthouse, and if he takes up a position on the pavement—but he mustn’t climb a lamp-post, tell him, or a waterspout; I won’t have anything

of that sort—and remains there long enough, he will ultimately enjoy the privilege of looking at me as I drive past. A cat may look at a King, and, I suppose, a soldier may look at a Mayor. At all events, I shan't offer any objection. It may do him good, and it can't do me any harm. For, although he belongs to a murderous trade, I don't suppose there is any of the basilisk or the Gorgon in his eye.'

'But he says he must see your worship here in your own residence, this very evening, your worship.'

'*Must* see me!' burst forth the Mayor. 'Well, upon my word, that's rich! Tell him if he *must* see me in my own residence this very evening, he may apply his eye to the bottom of the street-door, and, if the door-mat doesn't interfere with his vision, he may feast his eyes on my evening pumps, which will be just about all he'll catch of me, as I walk across the hall to the dining-room.'

'He, he, he, he!' laughed Spigot for about fifteen seconds, with the regularity of a clock ticking; for Mr. Buddlecombe, who evidently thought this sally rather smart, had given him a glance which unmistakably conveyed the mandate, 'Be tickled.'

When people are very angry there is nothing so soothing, just for a passing moment, as the consciousness of having said a smart, or what they consider a smart, thing at the expense of the person who has provoked their wrath. Mr. Buddlecombe almost smiled. Spigot was encouraged.

‘He’s a civil-spoken young gentleman, your worship,’ he pleaded, as he instinctively placed his finger and thumb into his waistcoat-pocket, and tenderly manipulated a sovereign which had recently found its way there, ‘a very civil-spoken young gent, and his manners lead one to believe he’s moved in polite circles. He begs your worship will be good enough to read this letter.’

‘O, all this abominable annoyance will utterly ruin my zest for dinner!’ growled Mr. Buddlecombe, as he snatched the letter. ‘I’ll take his letter, but tell him I shall not see him to-night, and not to call here again. My clerk will answer it, if it requires an answer.’

‘Very good, your worship.’

And Spigot withdrew, only too glad to have earned his sovereign so easily; for, though he did not approve of soldiers, he was sufficiently a political economist to know that their money

was as good as any other people's. He need not have read Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill to have mastered that fact.

'Now I dare say,' said the Mayor, holding the letter at arm's length and looking suspiciously on it, 'that there's a cracker or a squib inside, warranted to blow the opener's eyes out. That's the military idea of a joke. I wonder whether Bolitho would see it if it were played upon *him*. I wish they'd try. I am only astonished,' he continued, as he drew forth his double glasses and adjusted them, 'that I have not received before this a box containing a choice assortment of door-knockers. That, I believe, is the usual military offering to the Mayor of a town. Or woke up some morning and found the sign of the Red Lion over my portico. Another military *jew de spree*. Or a fine young donkey in my bed, alive and kicking, with Georgina's nightcap on! That is, I believe, the very *cream de la cream* of military *espieglerie*.'

By this time the glasses had been properly adjusted, and the envelope opened.

'Hallo! what's this?' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe, as, at the very first glance, his eye caught that magic little symbol £, with a good

long tail after it. 'Confound that Spigot, running off in such a hurry!'

The bell was rung violently, and in a very few moments Spigot reappeared.

'Don't be in such a hurry, Spigot. This overdone assumption of nimbleness at your time of life is unnatural, not to say ghastly.'

'It is indeed, your worship,' said Spigot humbly, and out of beath.

'Wait outside until I call you in. I may have some message to deliver to this individual.'

The mandate was of course obeyed.

'Now what *can* this person have to say to me on money matters? At all events, I'll do him the honour of reading his letter.

' "SIR,

"Knowing the unfortunate, and on my part deeply deplored, prejudice you entertain towards my profession, I apprehend some difficulty in obtaining an interview with you. I have, therefore, taken the precaution of providing myself with this letter in the event of your refusing in the first instance to see me. The importance of my errand will, I hope, justify what must seem to you an unwarrant-

able intrusion. It is in my power, sir, to save you no less a sum than £30,000 ; and how this can be done I am ready to communicate to you at once, if you will only afford me an opportunity of doing so in private.

‘ “ I remain, sir,

‘ “ Your obedient servant,

‘ “ A. F. WARRINER.” ’

‘ Well, a more extraordinary epistle I never read ! I do not know whether I should treat it with utter contempt, or afford this person the opportunity he solicits in, I am bound to admit, straightforward and yet respectful terms. It is quite within the bounds of possibility that he has, through relatives or friends, become possessed of certain information regarding some movements in the money market, which may affect me to a considerable extent ; and being anxious to curry favour with a personage in my exalted position—ahem ! Anyhow, I’ll take a little time to consider what course I shall pursue. In the meantime, however, he may get tired of the doorstep, Spigot !’

‘ Your worship,’ said Spigot, promptly re-appearing.

‘I may or may not see this gentleman. Request him to wait a little; and in the meantime you may promote him from the doorstep to the library. I’ll ring when I want you.’

‘Very good, your worship.’

‘I think I’ll see him,’ soliloquised the Mayor, as Spigot closed the door. ‘If it’s an outrageous attempt at a hoax, I flatter myself there’s enough inborn dignity about me which, with the divinity hedging my office, will cause the attempt to recoil on the offender’s own head. But I’m talking nonsense. He would never dare to think of such a thing. Preposterous! I’ll see him.’

Mr. Buddlecombe was just on the point of ringing the bell, when his hand was stayed by a horrible misgiving which then coursed through his brain, gathering strength step by step:—‘I am, and have been for a considerable time, a public character, and of course a fierce light has beaten upon many of my actions. When Member for Puddleton, I opposed every measure brought forward for the benefit of the army, on the grounds that there should be no army at all. I dare say I have made myself obnoxious to the military.

I shouldn't wonder if I've been burnt in effigy on numerous barrack-squares. My efforts may have retarded promotion or something of that kind, and this—this—' (here these thick-coming fancies assumed a most horrible shape, and his spirit faltered) 'this visit may be prompted by motives of revenge. History repeats itself. Was not the Duke of Buckingham assassinated at Portsmouth by an officer of the army who considered his professional prospects had been blasted by that ill-fated nobleman's policy? Portsmouth begins with a P; so does Puddleton! Buckingham with a B; so does Buddlecombe! Gracious! I may be on the eve of assassination!'

Having arrived at this ghastly conclusion, Mr. Buddlecombe was seized with a panic, in which he was very nearly opening the window and invoking external aid. A few moments' consideration, however, induced a more dignified state of mind, and he was about to content himself with ringing the bell and directing his visitor to be shown out, when another glance at the letter made him hesitate.

'An enormous sum! Quite a fortune! What can it mean?'

Finally greed and curiosity together settled

the question, and Mr. Buddlecombe summoned Spigot.

‘Spigot, show the windpipe-slitter in.’

‘Who, your worship?’

‘The professional brain-spatterer.’

‘I beg your most worshipful worship’s worshipful pardon, but I don’t quite——’

‘You never *do* quite. The military individual, of course. That’s the same thing, isn’t it?’

‘Certainly, your worship; *exactly* the same thing.’

‘And look here, Spigot: intimate to him in the plainest of terms that I have only a very few minutes to spare. The dinner can be served when ready, and you can ring the dinner-bell with more than usual emphasis; and if that has no effect you had better come in at intervals of two minutes to remind me that the dinner’s waiting.’

‘Your wishes shall be scrupulously attended to, your worship.’

‘I should think that would be a sufficient hint even to the most pachydermatous of military coxcombs,’ soliloquised Mr. Buddlecombe, as Spigot departed on his errand. ‘I feel I am quite right in granting this inter-

view. Never throw away a chance, has ever been my motto and the keystone of my success in life.'

Here the door was opened, and Algernon Warriner was shown in by Spigot. Notwithstanding the indignity he had been subjected to, of being kept waiting for fully ten minutes on the doorstep, there was not the slightest evidence of chagrin or impatience about Warriner. He was dressed in evening clothes, and wore an overcoat, one sleeve of which hung down by his side empty. Many months before, in the Crimea, a fragment of shell had struck him on the right fore-arm, splintering both bones; and it was solely to that glorious combination of youth, pluck and a good constitution, that he owed the preservation of the limb. The wound might have healed ere this, but Algernon Warriner, as brave a youngster as ever wore the British uniform, had insisted on coming off the sick-list, and taking his turn of duty in the deadly trenches long before he was fit to do so.

Many men who have been cool under an enemy's fire have found that 'interview with papa in the study' rather too much for their firm nerves. But young Warriner, as well as

being dauntless in war, was daring in love, and, though his demeanour was courtesy itself, there was an unmistakable air of self-possession about him. There was one heart, however, in the room, which was beating hard enough for his and itself as well, and that was Florence's, as she crouched behind the screen. Had Warriner been conscious of what was on the *other* side of the screen, *his* heart, too, might have accelerated its movement a little.

'I must apologise for intruding at such an unseasonable hour,' he said, with a polite bow.

'Never mind apologies, sir,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, stiffly returning the salutation, and fussily motioning his visitor to a seat.

'As you may have gathered from my card,' continued Warriner, after seating himself, 'I am quartered here.'

'And you might be hanged and drawn as well—here or anywhere else—for all *I'd* care,' growled Mr. Buddlecombe to himself, as he hurriedly passed his hand down his face, a trick very common with irritable people.

'As an inhabitant, therefore, of Puddleton—though only a temporary one—I may say I possess some slight grounds of introduction to

Puddleton's chief magistrate ; for, as I dare say you are aware, sir, an Englishman by becoming a soldier, does not forfeit his rights as a citizen.'

'Really, sir,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as he beat a tattoo, *prestissimo*, with the fingers of his right hand on the table beside him, 'I have a very few moments to spare, and as a saving of time we will dispense with apologies and all other preambles. I have read your letter, and now, sir, I await your explanation of its extraordinary contents.'

'To give you that explanation, sir, is of course the object of my visit,' returned Warriner, with great deliberation, but also extreme politeness. 'The statement contained in my letter no doubt caused you some surprise. Am I not right in supposing so, sir ?'

'I have already implied that it did, and still does, sir. Pray proceed a little quicker, sir.'

Warriner bowed with the greatest courtesy, as if intimating that Mr. Buddlecombe's wishes on this score should be sacredly observed, and proceeded, with rather more deliberation than before :

'It may also have awakened in your mind,

and most naturally so, I am bound to admit, some doubt as to whether I could carry out what I have professed myself able to do.'

'It did, sir. But I have given you the benefit of the doubt and granted you a hearing. Pray now give *me* the benefit of a little more expedition. My time is precious, sir.'

Here, most opportunely, Mr. Spigot's campanological performance, conducted according to his instructions 'with more than usual emphasis,' filled the whole house from basement to roof with a metallic clamour; and Mr. Buddlecombe was evidently deeply moved as he listened to

'That all-softening, overpowering knell,
The tocsin of the soul—the dinner-bell.'

'Hooray!' mentally ejaculated Warriner.
'The first outwork is carried!'

'Very precious indeed, sir,' repeated Mr. Buddlecombe, with considerable feeling, as the brazen clangour died away; adding, in the silent depths of his heart, 'Why, the clear turtle will be congealing in its receptive tureen, and he hasn't even opened his case.'

'Pray, sir, may I ask if that is your dinner-bell?' asked Warriner.

‘Of course it is, sir,’ snapped Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘Did you think, sir, it was my funeral-bell? or a muffin-bell? or a diving-bell? Or did you imagine, sir, that in this establishment, when the dinner is ready, it is the custom for the cook to shout out “The wittles is up”?’

‘Pray excuse my presence at such an inopportune time, sir,’ pleaded the polite but terribly prolix visitor. ‘The importance of the business on hand will, I feel sure, plead in my behalf, especially when I add my own expressions of regret that circumstances should have forced me into obtruding myself——’

‘I’ve told you before, sir,’ interrupted Mr. Buddlecombe, with a warmth of tone that brought Florence’s little face peeping round the edge of the screen, with considerable alarm portrayed in it, ‘I have told you before, sir, that apologies are only a waste of time. Now to the point. You say it is in your power to save me a very large sum of money. Out with it, sir, without any further beating about the bush.’

‘Knowing how much more experience you must possess than I do, sir, in monetary as well as in most other mundane matters, and

also having in view the difference in our ages, I feel it is the height of presumption on my part——'

'O dear, O dear! I wonder what the *congsamay* is *congsomayiny* itself into!' muttered Mr. Buddlecombe, with a stifled groan, as he rose from his chair and took a turn up and down the room.

'—to remind you of the trite old proverb, "More haste, less speed." This is true in most——'

'Mr. Bolitho and Mrs. Buddlecombe are in the drawing-room, your worship, and the dinner's waiting,' said Spigot, throwing open the door and speaking as impressively as he could.

'That's capital; he can't stand the strain much longer,' mentally remarked Warriner, with an internal chuckle.

'There, sir, do you hear that?' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as Spigot closed the door and retired. 'I'll really trouble you for a little more *saumon à la T'a*—— Dear, dear, I mean a little more expedition, sir. Surely you are not so morally blind as to wilfully keep a gentleman from his dinner.'

Certainly not, sir,' replied Warriner, again

courteously inclining his head, and speaking in more measured tones than ever. 'But still you will forgive me, I am sure, if I hint that, weighed with the importance of my business, a dinner should be as mere dust in the balance.'

'Nothing of the sort, sir,' snapped Mr. Buddlecombe, wheeling fiercely round on his visitor. 'I don't agree with you, sir;' and turning on his heel, he muttered with indignation, 'He's never seen *me* eat a dinner, or he wouldn't go calling it mere dust in the balance, the long-winded young puppy!'

'Well, sir, we will at once proceed to business, then. Will you allow me to consult my note-book for a few moments?'

In reply to this unreasonable and unseasonable request, Mr. Buddlecombe could only wave his hand and give vent to a nondescript noise which may or may not have been the permission solicited. Anyhow, Warriner interpreted it in the former sense; and while he was apparently absorbed in his notes, Mr. Buddlecombe paced up and down the room, venting his sorrow, his indignation, and his impatience in the following disjointed mutterings:

‘*Sooprame de volatile aux troofuls* ruined! *Filets de pigeon* done to rags! *Chapong rôtee au Périgord* must be rapidly becoming *chapong rôtee* au kitchen cinder. I shall have a sort of rag and cinder banquet.’

Here Spigot appeared, and piled up the agony still higher with :

‘The French cook, your worship, says the sight of his dinner spoiling before his very eye is getting too much for his feelings.’

‘O, flesh and blood can stand this no longer!’ said the Mayor, in a desperate aside ; adding aloud, ‘There, sir, you hear that. You’ve been quite long enough consulting your note-book. I can’t waste another moment over preliminaries. State your case at once.’

‘What a lot of playing the old gentleman takes! A salmon is a joke to him,’ thought Warriner. ‘Ten thousand pardons,’ he pleaded, with another of his extremely polite bows. ‘Believe me, I feel the delicacy of my position most acutely, and I must really beg to be allowed once more to tender my sincerest apol——’

‘Bless my soul!’ exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe, wildly, ‘politeness is all very well—I

myself always carry it to an absurd extreme, but we have had enough of it on this occasion, sir. I'm sick of it. For goodness' sake let's have a little plain speaking now.'

'Certainly, sir, I quite admit the justice of your remarks; and you, on your side, will, I am sure, enter into my feelings of embarrassment——'

'No, sir, I can't do anything of the sort

'Pray, sir, do not hurry me, it is a subject involving so much——'

'Waste of time, sir!' roared Mr. Buddlecombe, now losing all control over himself. 'O, I see through all this delay and shilly-shallying. It is merely the vain expedient to gain time on the part of a—a—of an impostor, sir, an impostor!'

Here Mr. Buddlecombe, red in the face with passion, snapped his fingers at Warriner and pointed indignantly to the door.

'There, sir, there's your way. Be off with you!'

The imperturbable Warriner rose slowly from his seat, bowed low, and moved towards the door. On reaching it, he turned round and quietly said:

'It is in sorrow, sir, rather than in anger or

indignation, that I repudiate the charge of imposition. If you cannot enter into *my* feelings, I can into *yours*, knowing as I do how strong appearances must be against me. But I can only reiterate, on my word of honour'—this solemnly placing his hand on his heart—'that the matter I had to lay before you would have involved a saving to you of the large sum I mentioned in my letter.'

'The dinner will be utterly spoiled, your worship,' said Spigot, putting his head in at the door.

Mr. Buddlecombe manifested great emotion; and Warriner continued, in that style of periphrastic politeness which he had adopted all through the interview, for the purpose of spinning out the time:

'I feel that I have already transgressed the limits of politeness beyond all rules of etiquette. Good-evening, sir.'

Poor Mr. Buddlecombe, torn by conflicting emotions, was a pitiable spectacle.

'Good-eve—stay, sir, don't—dear me—utterly spoiled! Thirty thousand *filets de pigeons* sterling. I can't see any way out of the difficulty. O dear, O dear! Hang it, sir! give me the pleasure of your company at

dinner, and you can impart this piece of information in your own way afterwards.'

'Delighted,' said Warriner, pleasantly. 'Since you're so pressing, I shall have much pleasure.'

'Humph,' grunted Mr. Buddlecombe aside, "'since you're so pressing," as the paving-stone remarked to the steam-roller. Spigot!'

'Your worship,' said Spigot, promptly re-appearing from outside.

'Relieve this gentleman of his hat and coat; and, Spigot, lay another place at the table; he will dine here.

As Mr. Buddlecombe made this last communication, the situation between master and man were, for the first time in their respective lives, reversed. Spigot fairly stared his master out of countenance, and Mr. Buddlecombe dared not meet the searching gaze of his servant.

'I beg your worship's pardon,' at last stammered Spigot; 'but I don't think I quite heard what your worship was pleased to say.'

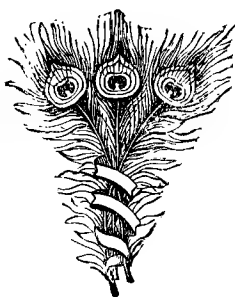
'He will dine here; take his hat and coat,' sharply repeated Mr. Buddlecombe.

Like one in a dream, Spigot obeyed the behest; and then, with a sort of savage polite-

ness, Mr. Buddlecombe bowed his guest out of the room and followed.

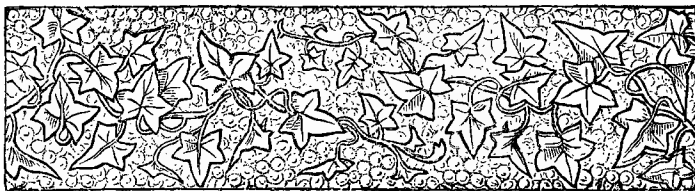
As soon as the coast was clear, Florence emerged from behind the screen.

‘O, Algy, Algy!’ she exclaimed, clapping her hands and laughing merrily, ‘you clever darling! I love you more than ever now, for your tact and coolness. But what *can* this scheme be? Algy has given his word of honour, so of course there *must* be something. O, poor darling old papa! Now I must run up, and then go into the drawing-room as if I had just come down from my room.



PART III.

NONE BUT THE BRAVE DESERVE THE FAIR.



CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE EXPLOSION.

I SHALL not ask you, reader, to Mr. Buddlecombe's dinner. In the first place, you have had, I should think, enough of it in anticipation. In the second, the action of the story is in abeyance throughout the whole of the dinner-scene. I will, therefore, leave to your lively imagination the astonishment of Mrs. Buddlecombe and old Bolitho when the Mayor ushered in Algernon Warriner, and resume the narrative at that point where Mr. Buddlecombe, eager to hear the wonderful scheme and then get rid of his guest, hurried him back to the study soon after the ladies had left the table, much to the convivial old Bolitho's dissatisfaction.

‘I was very pleased with the way in which Florence conducted herself,’ mentally remarked Mr. Buddlecombe, as he took his seat, after having motioned Warriner to a chair on the other side of the study-table. ‘There was an unmistakable air of utter indifference to this young man, which must have been inexpressibly galling to a conceited young military coxcomb. I’m on the tenter-hooks of expectation about this scheme.’

‘What a hurry the old boy is in!’ simultaneously mused Warriner, as he took *his* seat. ‘I hadn’t half punished that port of his. Florry looked lovelier than ever.’

‘Now, sir,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, having settled himself comfortably, ‘I hope you will be good enough to divulge the object of your visit to me this evening with a little more expedition than you observed before dinner. Brevity, allow me to remind you, sir, is the soul of business as well as of wit.’

‘Certainly, sir. I am now in a better position to be brief than before partaking of your hospitality’

‘That means,’ thought the Mayor, highly pleased at what he imagined was a covert allusion to his exalted position—‘that means

he was awed by my bearing before dinner, but that my port after dinner has given him courage. Now, sir,' he added aloud, 'I await your communication.'

'I can state it to you in a very few words.'

'So much the better,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, leaning forward in his chair, eagerly listening.

'I shall go straight to the point,' said Warriner. 'You have, sir——'

At this most interesting moment the door was boisterously flung open, and old Bolitho entered in a state of considerable hilarity.

'Bother! Bolitho's the plague of my life,' growled Mr. Buddlecombe, striking his knee with his clenched fist.

'Here I am, you see,' said old Bolitho, rather unnecessarily. 'To make use of a nautical phrase, I slipped my cable and gave chase.'

'To judge from his flushed countenance,' snarled Mr. Buddlecombe aside, 'I should say "hard a-port" would be the nautical phrase to express what Bolitho's been up to.'

'I guessed your little game all of a sudden, Buddle, my boy,' said the hearty but somewhat obtrusive old gentleman. 'Ah, conquering

hero,' he added, turning his beaming and rubicund old countenance full on Warriner, 'it has afforded me the keenest gratification to see you a guest of my old friend. Now that we are untrammelled by the presence of the ladies or the etiquette of the dinner-table, allow me to shake your hand once more. Are you quite sure now it doesn't hurt your wounded arm ?'

'No, no ; not in the least,' said Warriner, with a careless laugh.

'Then what does he carry it in a sling for, if it's all right ?' growled Mr. Buddlecombe aside.

'Yes ; and how you carried a message through a murderous fire from one brigadier to another after two aides-de-camp and an orderly officer had been killed or seriously wounded in the attempt,' continued Mr. Bolitho, giving Warriner's hand another hearty wring.

'O nonsense, Mr. Bolitho !' said the young man, in a serio-comic vein. 'These things don't bear talking about. A soldier's motto is "Deeds, not words."'

'Of course not words from those who have performed the deeds ; but others may speak about them ; ay, and speak too in trumpet-

tongued tones!’ said old Bolitho, finishing up with a roar, just to illustrate his meaning.

‘Bolitho,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, labouring to be dulcet-toned by way of a cutting contrast, ‘do you know, looking at the world and its inhabitants from a Shakespearian point of view—the one as a stage and the other as mere players, it strikes me you’ve got a pretty easy part to play.’

‘So much the better, for I’m not much of an actor,’ was the hearty rejoinder, followed by a good-humoured laugh.

‘Yes,’ continued Mr. Buddlecombe, ‘a very easy part; it’s like the lion’s in the “most lamentable comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe.” “You may do it extempore, for it’s nothing but roaring.”’

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed old Bolitho, immensely tickled.

‘Confound it!’ muttered Mr. Buddlecombe, dropping the dulcet tone, for it is a very annoying, not to say exasperating thing, after having carefully pointed your shaft and tipped it with a nice little piece of ill-nature, to find, when you fire it point-blank into your intended victim, that it tickles pleasantly instead of smarting keenly. ‘Confound it, I have often

heard that it takes a surgical operation to make a Scotchman see a joke; but, hang me! I don't believe all the surgical operations in the world would ever make Bolitho *feel* one.'

During this muttered reflection its unconscious subject seated himself in a comfortable arm-chair, beamed pleasantly, rubbed his hands merrily, and altogether was evidently settling himself down for a cosy half-hour.

'Bolitho,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, who was fretting and fuming to resume the *tête-à-tête* with Warriner, 'as you don't appear to have anything important to communicate, I think it just as well to remind you that you are interrupting a private conversation of a somewhat pressing nature.'

'O, don't mind me,' replied the irrepressible old gentleman. 'Besides, *I* know quite well what you've got to say. You hadn't left me alone two minutes with the wine, Buddle, when the subject of your little private conversation occurred to me, and so I took the liberty——'

'Don't mention it,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, catching his friend up short. 'When you *don't* take a liberty, Bolitho, *then* the circumstance *may* be worth recording amongst the

phenomena of the age. But when you *do* take a liberty, Bolitho—Why, as the French say, “*Cela va song dear !*”

‘Well, well,’ returned old Bolitho, rising from his seat, without the slightest symptom of chagrin, and smiting his captious old friend on the shoulder, ‘I knew *I* should make no difference, for, Buddle, we were boys together.’

‘I know we were ; but, Bolitho, it doesn’t follow that we are, therefore, to be Siamese twins together,’ testily retorted Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘*Do* allow our respective paths of life to bifurcate occasionally. Oh, do you know,’ he muttered, as he took a turn towards the window, just by way of calming his excited feelings a little, ‘my advice to anyone beginning life is, Don’t be a boy ; at least, don’t be a boy together with another boy, or you’ll live to repent it all your days.’

‘Yes, I guessed what it was you wished to tell our mutual friend,’ said the pachydermatous old Bolitho, following Mr. Buddlecombe and speaking confidentially ; that is to say, people in the adjoining villa might possibly have failed to catch the drift of his remarks ; ‘you wanted to tell him that a

change had come o'er the spirit of your dream. You wanted to make the *amende honorable* in a neat little speech about retracting your previous bad opinion of his profession. By the living Jingo, Warriner, my boy, I was never so surprised in my life as when I saw you come into the drawing-room the guest of my old friend! Anyone might have knocked me down with a feather.'

'What an opportunity I lost!' growled Mr. Buddlecombe. 'I'd have expended the contents of my last pillow in the cause.'

'I am sure,' said Warriner, with excessive politeness, 'that a profound sense of gratification would permeate through all ranks of the British army could they only know how they have risen in the estimation of the worshipful Mayor of Puddleton.'

'Does he mean that now for impudence or not?' mentally reasoned Mr. Buddlecombe. 'Impudence, I should think. I'll confront impudence with dignity.'

With this intention Mr. Buddlecombe assumed an attitude much affected by old gentlemen when standing on their dignity—that is to say, he pulled up his shirt-collar with one hand, placed the thumb of the other

in the nearer arm-hole of his waistcoat, planted one foot at about right angles to the other, and then, after clearing his throat, commenced with overwhelming pomposity :

‘ Sir, the honour you confer——’

‘ Ha, ha, ha ! fancy old Buddle a sort of military idol !’ roared Mr. Bolitho, at the same time administering a poke in the ribs which curled up the dignified attitude with a completeness that brought knees and nose into pretty close proximity, besides communicating a spasmodic movement of a ‘ double-shuffle ’ nature to the feet of the victim.

‘ If I killed Bolitho some day, surely it would come under the head of justifiable homicide,’ was the nice little point of criminal law which for a few moments agitated Mr. Buddlecombe’s magisterial mind. ‘ Bolitho,’ he remarked, as soon as he had recovered himself a little, ‘ you are utterly wrong, as you generally are, in your conjectures. The business between this gentleman and myself is of so private a nature as to necessitate a temporary separation even between two who have been “ boys together.” You will oblige me, Bolitho, by leaving us alone for a short time.’

‘ Of course, Buddle, old boy, if you really

wish it. Don't stand on ceremony with me. I don't with you ;' this last statement being fully illustrated by a slap on the back.

'I know you don't,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, sharply. 'I wish you did. But there's as much chance of your standing on ceremony as there is of your standing on your head ; and that being the lightest part of your system will naturally always be at the top.'

At this personal sally old Bolitho laughed until the tears ran down his fat red cheeks.

'Now what *are* you to do with a delicate little sensitive plant like that?' groaned Mr. Buddlecombe. 'How can you guard your language so as not to offend this shrinking little *mimosa pudica* ?'

'Quite right, Buddle, quite right,' said old Bolitho, wiping his eyes. 'I'm neither a master of ceremonies nor an acrobat, so I neither stand on ceremony nor my head. Ha, ha, ha ! But as you really wish it I'll leave you and go and join the ladies. See you again, Warriner, my boy. One more shake of the hand. By Jove, I can't look at you, after what your brother-officers have told me, without picturing the whole thing. The shots fly like hail. Bang, bang ! go the guns. " For-

ward!" is the cry. Bang, bang! more guns——'

'Bolitho, I object to spirited imitations of big guns in my house. The only imitation of a gun you can oblige me with will be by going off;' and Mr. Buddlecombe pointed to the door.

'All right, Buddle,' said old Bolitho. 'Don't make a stranger of me. Bang! I'm off;' and off he was, gaily humming the 'British Grenadiers' as he went.

His departure was a relief to Warriner, as well as to the Mayor; for now, having fulfilled the condition on which Mrs. Buddlecombe's support had been promised, there was no longer that object in delay which had existed before the stipulated invitation to dinner had been wrung from the unwilling host. On the contrary, delays and interruptions were now as undesirable as, before dinner, they had been the reverse, inasmuch as they were calculated to work Mr. Buddlecombe's excitable temperament into a dangerously combustible condition, in which a fearful explosion might result on the coming disclosure.

'Now, sir,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as he resumed his seat on old Bolitho's depar-

ture, 'now for this wonderful revelation of yours.'

'Not wonderful, sir, in the least,' replied Warriner, who thought it prudent to let the old gentleman calm down a little after the recent interruption before going straight to the point. 'I assure you, sir, it is, like many apparently abstruse matters, very simple when you know all about it.'

'Well, sir, we are now secure from further interruption ; let us "know all about it."'

The Mayor's tone and manner—for his last four words were pronounced in a snappish imitation of Warriner's—warned the latter that he had better go on at once, and he had just commenced, 'You are blessed, sir, with——' when again was the door opened, and Spigot entered.

'I beg your worship's pardon ; I thought your worship had joined the ladies,' apologised the obsequious menial.

Now who ever knew a servant, least of all a butler, enter an occupied room by mistake that he did not, before retiring, perform some little service, just to show the readiness with which he could adapt himself to unforeseen circumstances, and also his unflagging atten-

tion to the *minutiæ* of his office? It is generally the fire that comes in for a little ostentatious attention. In this case, however, it being summer, there was no fire; so Spigot, moth-like, made for the light, and, unconscious of the ferocious scowl fixed upon him, proceeded to regulate the moderator-lamp.

‘Spigot, if you don’t retire this moment,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, fiercely, ‘you’ll find yourself taking the title-*rôle* of a one act tragedy, entitled the *Butler on his Beam-ends*; or, *the Intruder injured for Life*. Do you hear me?’

‘Certainly, your worship;’ and Spigot hurriedly shuffled out of the room, murmuring as soon as he got outside: ‘Bless me, he goes off like a champagne cork!’

‘Now, sir, once more, please,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, not in the most angelic of tempers. ‘Not another interruption shall I brook. Out with this communication of yours, sir, which is to save me the large sum mentioned in your note.’

With this he leaned forward in his chair, and anxiously awaited Warriner’s reply.

‘You have, sir, a charming and accomplished daughter——’

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, with a frigid *hauteur*, ‘to the author of her being, who has had every opportunity of observing those charms and of paying for those accomplishments, your remark is totally devoid of novelty.’

‘To that daughter, sir,’ continued Warriner firmly, but politely, ‘I have heard, on the best authority, that you give a marriage portion of thirty thousand pounds. Is not that the case?’

Mr. Buddlecombe rose from his chair in fierce wrath.

‘Yes, sir, I do! And what of that, sir? What if I do? What the deuce is it to *you*?’

‘Why, sir,’ continued Warriner coolly, but courteously, ‘I’ll take her with nothing, and be proud and delighted to do so. You will thus readily perceive how a saving of thirty thousand pounds will accrue to yourself. That, sir, is the——’

‘Get out of my sight!’ gasped Mr. Buddlecombe, who, for some moments, had been speechless with rage. ‘Go away, or I shall have a fit! I—I’ll give instant orders to have you tarred and feathered!’

As the worshipful gentleman uttered this

fearful threat, he staggered to the mantelpiece, rang a furious peal on the bell, and then sank back into an arm-chair, evincing every symptom of an approaching apoplectic fit. He had now all but lost the power of speech, and could only, as he wildly gesticulated with his arms and rolled his head from side to side, faintly articulate :

‘Get out of my sight ! Go away !’

‘For goodness’ sake calm yourself, sir,’ said Warriner, who was greatly alarmed. But he might just as effectually have addressed that remark to the winds and the waves in the midst of a typhoon, and the very tones of his voice produced a perceptible exacerbation of the apoplectic symptoms. ‘I really did not expect quite such an effect as this,’ he thought. ‘My presence seems to exasperate him beyond all bounds. I shall never forgive myself if the consequences are serious. I shall retire for the present by the shortest route.’

Carrying this decision at once into effect, Warriner stepped through the French window, which was partly open, and disappeared in the darkness outside. He had scarcely made good his retreat, when Mrs. Buddlecombe, Florence, and old Bolitho, followed by Spigot

and a few other servants, rushed into the room in response to the loud peals of the bell which had sounded the alarm throughout the house.

‘O darling papa, what is the matter?’ cried Florence, rushing terror-stricken to her father, and taking one of his hands in both hers.

‘Joshua, my own Joshua, speak to me!’ screamed Mrs. Buddlecombe, as she seized his other hand, knelt by his side, and looked imploringly up into his face.

But Mr. Buddlecombe spoke not; he only rolled his eyes, and breathed stertorously.

‘O Joshua, Joshua!’ sobbed Mrs Buddlecombe, ‘I’ve often told you how it would be some day. How I *have* begged and prayed of you to curb that excitable temperament of yours, especially after a meal! But you would never take my advice.’

Now,

‘Sadder than owl-songs or the midnight blast;
Of all the horrid hideous notes of woe
Uttered by friends, those prophets of the past,
Is that portentous phrase, “I told you so.”’

It is also just about the most exasperating remark that can be made to anyone troubled in mind or in body. It may, therefore, appear

that Mrs. Buddlecombe rubbed the sore when she should have brought the plaster, as honest old Gonzalo would have expressed it. However, rubbing the sore was just the very best thing the good lady could have done. There is not the slightest doubt that, on the homœopathic principle of like curing like, it saved Mr. Buddlecombe from apoplexy. A rage all but produced the disease; another rage averted it. He at once found his tongue, though at first it was with difficulty that he used it.

‘“O woman! in our hours of ease,”’ he observed feebly, but with an ominous glare in his eye, ‘“Uncertain, coy, and hard to please; When pain and anguish wring the brow,” your invariable remark is, “I told you so, but you wouldn’t take my advice.”’

With this last outrage on Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Buddlecombe was himself again. He jumped up from his chair, and with fearful volubility poured forth the pent-up torrents of his wrath:

‘O Georgina, it’s positively maddening! It doesn’t matter whether you’ve caught a cold in the head, or dropped ten thousand pounds in railway shares, or slipped upon a bit of orange-peel, or murdered your mother-in-law,

or carried away a button, or tumbled off the top of the Monument, it's always the same with a woman, "I told you so, but you wouldn't take my advice." Did you tell me, Georgina, that I was going to be made a fool of by that young puppy? Did you apprise me of the fact that I was about to be turned inside out, upside down, backwards and forwards, round and round, by that one-armed, double-faced young jackanapes?

'Why, what has he done?' chorused everybody

'Done? Done *me*! Why, he's obtained a dinner from me under false pretences, and then made a fool of me, coupled with a gross insult towards a member of my family.'

'I don't believe it; there's been some misunderstanding,' said Florence to herself. 'O dear, where is he?'

'Here, close that window, Spigot, and draw the curtains,' said Mr. Buddlecombe. 'Come along, follow me, you servants; and if we find him in the grounds, I'll have him tarred and feathered and then set on fire in the water-butt down at the stables;' and Mr. Buddlecombe bustled out of the room, followed by Spigot and the rest of the servants.

‘O, what *can* Algy have said or done, and what *has* become of him?’ thought poor Florence, as she clasped her hands together.

‘It will never do for Joshua to be left to his own devices in this excited state,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s saying. Tarred and feathered, and set on fire in the water-butt, indeed! I’ll follow him;’ and Mrs. Buddlecombe hurriedly left the room.





CHAPTER II.

A TRUSTY FRIEND.

FLORENCE was about to follow her mother, when old Bolitho placed his hand gently on her shoulder and detained her.

‘Stay, Florry ; your father is all right now. He has regained his normal condition of fluster, and you had better leave him to your mother. It’s a queer piece of business, isn’t it ? But I don’t believe for one moment young Warriner has done or said anything wrong.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘I wish he had not beaten such a rapid retreat, though. However, I won’t believe any harm of him. I never came across a young fellow I liked and admired so much in every way.’

‘What a darling old pet old Mr. Bolitho is!’ thought Florence.

‘I tell you what it is,’ said Mr. Bolitho, addressing an imaginary audience rather than Florence, ‘if I had a daughter I’d—I’d—hang it! I’d ram her down his throat as a reward for valour!’

Notwithstanding her distress of mind, Florence found it impossible to repress a laugh; but old Mr. Bolitho looked quite serious, a wonderful phenomenon that at once attracted her attention.

‘What’s the matter, Mr. Bolitho?’

‘Well, since you’ve noticed a change in my manner, I’ll tell you what’s the matter. I must say, Florence, that during all these years I have known you, ever since you were a baby with a mistaken notion that your duty towards your godfather was to gouge his eyes out, I do not recollect one single act of yours which was anything but pleasing in those organs, not even your infantile efforts to deprive me of them.’

‘Then I have incurred your displeasure this very evening? O, what is it, Mr. Bolitho?’ asked Florence, eagerly. ‘Can I,’ she asked herself, turning her face away to hide the

blushes with which the very thought suffused her fair cheeks, 'O, can I unconsciously during the dinner have betrayed my love for Algy?'

'Yes, Florry, I am sorry to say that this very evening your conduct occasioned me some pain, and, I may add, annoyance.'

'Occasioned you pain and annoyance, Mr. Bolitho? *You*, who have always been a second father to me? O, you know I would not do so willingly!'

'I do not like to see, Florry, in one so young such coldness, such marble-like indifference in a case where anyone would suppose youthful interest, and at all events a passing sympathy, would be most readily awakened. That gallant young fellow, Florry, with the tacit but eloquent reminder of his gallantry before you in the shape of that shattered arm—why, the sight of him stirs up even *my* old blood; but *you*, a young girl at an impressionable age too, were like an icicle—treated him, forsooth, with a frigid indifference that amounted to positive contempt. I could have shaken you, Florry!'

'O, how awfully knowing Mr. Bolitho is!' murmured Florence, as she turned aside to hide a smile.

'Ah, you may well turn away, Florry, con-

science-stricken in the knowledge that my rebuke is merited. And the worst of it is, I could see that this coldness was no overacted assumption of maidenly coyness, but genuine, if such a term can be so unworthily applied.'

'O, Mr. Bolitho, how can you see into our hearts in this way?' said Florence, archly.

'Ah, Florry, we old people can see through and through you young ones. Our mental vision can go through a whole line of young people like a straw through a row of larks. It's all here, Florry,' tapping his forehead. 'Age may dim our eyes, but experience provides us mentally with patent reflectors of the best description. Don't be cold-hearted, Florry. I have certainly never noticed anything of the sort in you before this evening; but this evening it was unmistakable.'

'The very evening of all others when my heart was warmest,' thought Florence.

'Beware of coldness of heart, Florry, my child,' resumed Mr. Bolitho, evidently determined that if for once in his life he preached a sermon he would make the most of his text. 'A cold-hearted girl will grow up into a calculating, uncharitable, intolerant, and intolerable woman of the world. Just think, Florry,

when your little head rested on your little pillow, and you lay nestling upon your soft downy little bed, soothed to sleep by a delicious sense of security and the sweet consciousness of loving hearts around you, that young fellow lay far from "home, sweet home" (Florry turned away, buried her face in her handkerchief, and gave way to tears), 'his couch probably a few feet of mud in the deadly trenches; his lullaby the savage shouts of the enemy, the shrieks of the wounded, or the rattle of musketry; his narcotic the agonies of a wound received for *you*, for *me*, for *every* Englishwoman and Englishman who lives at home at ease.'

With a passionate vehemence Florence turned to Mr. Bolitho, placed her hands on his shoulders, and gazed steadfastly up into his face through her tears.

'O Mr. Bolitho, I love him!'

'Eh?' said old Bolitho, coming down with a run from eloquent declamation to gaping astonishment.

'I love him.'

'*Love* him?'

'Yes, dearly, fondly, with all my heart!'

'Bless my soul! This is an astounding jump

from the arctic circle to the torrid zone—from thirty degrees below zero to one hundred and twenty in the shade. Do you mean to tell me you love this young man ?

‘ Yes, passionately.’

‘ Dear me,’ said Mr. Bolitho ; adding in a soliloquy, as he turned away from Florence, ‘ I had no idea I possessed this wonderful gift of eloquence to such a dangerous degree. I must use it with greater care, or give it an outlet in Parliament. Here have I, by sheer force and beauty of language, so worked upon this young girl’s feelings as to actually make her fall desperately in love with a young man whom, not five minutes before, she regarded with utter indifference. I must undo the mischief.’

Here old Bolitho faced about, coughed, and assumed a severe expression of countenance.

‘ Florence Beatrice Henrietta, as your godfather I feel my moral responsibility most acutely, and I totally disapprove of this sudden plunge of yours into the vortex of love. At your age, Florence Beatrice, I should have taken at least three hours falling desperately in love, but you have done it in as many minutes ; and now it is my bounden

duty to see that you fall out as quickly as you fell in. Why, what do you mean by it? You never set eyes on this young man before this evening.'

'O yes, I have,' said Florence. 'We have known and loved each other ever since we met at Folkestone, when mamma and I were there by ourselves, summer before last, and he had not long been sent home from the Crimea after the first time he was wounded.'

'Then it wasn't my eloquence, after all,' observed old Bolitho, rather thankfully. 'Florry, you sly little puss, you've been quietly poking fun at your old friend and godfather.'

'No, I never felt more in earnest in my life than I do now. O Mr. Bolitho, you said that, while he was away in that awful land of bloodshed and pestilence, I slept through the nights in peaceful happiness. You said, too, something about my pillow. Ah, it could tell a sad little tale of "patter, patter," all through the weary long nights for many, many months.'

'Poor little pillow!' said old Bolitho, with emotion.

'The agony and suspense of that time, borne in secret, nearly wore me out,' whimpered poor

little Florence, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief.

‘Yes, yes,’ said old Bolitho, patting her shoulder; ‘I recollect now how ill you looked, and how we physicked you for outgrowing your strength, or something of that sort.’

‘I suffered more than he did. O, Mr. Bolitho, there is more aching in the loving hearts at home than in the wounds of those fighting abroad.’

And here Florence, completely overcome by the recollections of what she had endured, threw herself, sobbing, on her old friend’s bosom.

‘Don’t cry, Florry,’ said old Bolitho, in a very husky voice, and folding his arms round her; ‘don’t cry. As the old song says,

“O, were I Queen of England,
Supreme ’neath heaven’s dome,
I’d have no fighting-men abroad.
No weeping maids at home—
I’d have no fighting-men abroad,
No weeping——”

old jackasses over sixty years of age, who ought to know better;’ and up went old Bolitho’s handkerchief to his eyes. ‘I never could stand seeing a woman cry, least of all my little god-daughter Florry,’ he continued, as he enveloped

his fine erubescient old proboscis in the silken folds of the handkerchief. 'The sight of a woman crying always gives me a severe cold in the head,' this statement being followed by a corroborative blast on the afore-mentioned feature. 'I suppose she creates a certain amount of dampness in the atmosphere. D-o-don't cry, Florry; you're giving me the influenza.'

'It's over-excitement, after all these months of suspense; and then the anxiety of to-night, as to what has happened between papa and Algy. There, I shan't cry any more, Mr. Bolitho.'

'Ah, Florry,' said the soft-hearted old man, holding her at arm's length and gazing fondly on the sweet girlish young face, 'how could he find it in his heart to leave you that time at Folkestone? for his brother-officers, who are never tired of singing his praises, have told me that he insisted on returning to the Crimea long before he had sufficiently recovered from his first wound, to be fit for campaigning.'

'Ah, Mr. Bolitho, you do not know Algy as well as I do.'

'Well, I don't suppose I do, my dear.'

'It was because he was so brave and so good

and so true, that he left me. When I tried to persuade him not to go, and pointed out that surely he had fought and bled enough for his country, and, I am now ashamed to say, added that he couldn't care for me if he insisted on going before he was ordered, he silenced me with two lines of poetry, which, he said, had been addressed more than two hundred years ago by a cavalier to his lady-love, when she had chided him for leaving her to go to the wars :

“ I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more.”

I never have forgotten them, and never shall ; they are so tender and true.’

‘ Well, Florry, I am glad *you* have proved more “tender and true” than the lady to whom those lines were originally addressed,’ said old Bolitho, alluding, of course, to the story of the unfortunate young Lovelace—the warrior-poet in point.

‘ Why, do you mean to say she proved unfaithful, with those beautiful lines always whispering to her heart, as they *must* have done ?’

‘ Yes,’ said Mr. Bolitho, who was as hearty an admirer of the old English ballads as Sir Philip

Sidney—‘yes ; when he returned from the wars wounded, as Algy has done, he found her married to another.’

‘O, how sad !’ said Florence. ‘Why, it’s even more shocking than the conduct of Annie Laurie in not marrying the man who paid her such beautiful compliments about her throat and breast, and was ready to lay him down and die for her sake.’

‘Well, well, Florry, it’s all the same to him now, whether she was faithful or not, so you needn’t——’

‘Hush, Mr. Bolitho ! I think I hear tapping at the window. Yes, and I hear Algy’s voice calling you.’

Florence was quite right, and in what old Bolitho called “a brace of shakes” the shutters were opened, and Algernon Warriner admitted.

‘See, the conquering hero comes once more,’ said old Bolitho. ‘Conquering hero, what the dickens made you bolt in that way ?’

‘O Algy ! what happened between you and papa ? and what made you go away so hurriedly ?’

‘Yes, yes, I’ll explain all ; but tell me first, Florry, how your father is.’

‘O, he’s all right. Mamma put him into another rage, which brought him round at once. Now, Algy, tell us all about it. You can say anything you like before Mr. Bolitho. I’ve made him our confidant.’

‘Yes, my dear boy, fire away.’

‘Well, Florry, I must first explain to you the little *ruse de guerre*, or rather *d’amour*——’

‘It’s all the same, my dear boy,’ interposed old Bolitho. ‘Ovid, who’s an authority on the subject, says, “Love is a species of warfare.”’

‘Which I employed to obtain an invitation to dinner this evening from your father.’

‘You needn’t, Algy; I know it.’

‘Why, has he told you?’

‘No; I was in the room behind the screen all the time you were with papa, before dinner, and I heard everything. That was *my* little *ruse*.’

‘And why were you there, Florry?’

‘To protect you, Algy.’

‘Dear me, I had no idea I had such an effective little guardian angel so near me.’

‘Well, but Mr. Bolitho doesn’t know, Algy; so we must enlighten him. You see, Mr. Bolitho, mamma said she would never countenance our engagement until she saw Algy a guest at

papa's table by papa's own invitation. Now, Algy, you go on ; you can do it quicker.'

'Well, you see, Mr. Bolitho, I knew if I could secure Mrs. Buddlecombe as an ally, the battle would be half won——'

'You know, Mr. Bolitho, mamma's awfully fond of Algy.'

'Besides, it was necessary to make a beginning of some sort, and I knew that with Mr. Buddlecombe's prejudices any ordinary course was out of the question. So I determined to get this invitation to dinner. I called this evening shortly before the dinner-time, and sent up a letter to Mr. Buddlecombe, stating on my word of honour that it was in my power to save him a large sum of money if he would grant me an immediate and private interview. Eventually this had the desired effect. I was granted the interview, and I managed to spin it out without divulging the scheme, until, what between curiosity to hear what I had to say and anxiety not to have the dinner spoiled, he was forced to adopt the middle course of inviting me to dine. Well, after dinner——'

'Now comes the part I want to know,' interpolated Florence.

‘I divulged my scheme, by which Mr. Buddlecombe was to be saved thirty thousand pounds.’

‘Thirty thousand pounds!’ ejaculated old Bolitho. ‘Bless me, quite a fortune!’

‘Yes; that, I believe, is the exact amount of your dowry, isn’t it, Florry?’

‘Yes; but what of that, Algy?’

‘Why,’ said Warriner, placing his arm round Florence’s waist, and drawing her tenderly to him, ‘I told him I would be proud and happy to take you with nothing. That was the scheme by which he was to be saved thirty thousand pounds. Quite correct, wasn’t it? On this your father nearly had a fit, and would have had one, there’s not the slightest doubt, if I had not got out of his sight as soon as possible. So I beat a rapid retreat, and waited outside, with a quiet cigar, on the look-out. Then I made a reconnaissance in the direction of this window, and on hearing Mr. Bolitho’s dulcet tones, I tapped; and there I was, tapping with the pertinacity of a woodpecker, for about——’

‘O good gracious, Algy, what’s the matter with Mr. Bolitho?’

Well might Florence be startled by the

appearance her good old friend and confidant presented. He looked even nearer apoplexy than Mr. Buddlecombe had gone. His face was purple, his cheeks inflated, the veins on his forehead knotted, and his eyes seemed starting from his head. It was fully two minutes—which is a long time when you are choking—before Mr. Bolitho, by dint of vigorous slapping on the back from Florence and Warriner, recovered sufficiently to speak.

‘O dear, O dear!’ wheezed and gasped the old gentleman, with a twinkle in his eye which presaged a possible relapse at any moment. ‘You’ve nearly been the death of me, my boy. Two fine old English gentlemen killed in the same evening wouldn’t have been a bad bag for even a Crimean hero. You see, Florry, I was afraid of laughing outright for fear of bringing your father in. O dear, O dear! I never knew anyone get the blind side of my old friend Josh Buddle before! Tread on my toe, Florry; stamp upon it, jump upon it—the right toe, the gouty one. That may induce me to take for a few moments a more serious view of things in general.’

It is highly probable that an acute twinge of gout *would* temporarily dull even the keenest

sense of the ridiculous: but this drastic measure, as prescribed by Mr. Bolitho for himself, was not applied, and his mirth was allowed to subside gradually.

‘Now we must talk a little business,’ was his first remark on regaining a certain amount of composure. ‘I’ll make it all right with your father in the end, Florry. Just at first he’ll be a little obstreperous; but constant dropping will wear away a stone, and I mean to drop on to him with a little plan I’ve got here,’ and Mr. Bolitho tapped his forehead significantly.

‘Patent reflectors, Mr. Bolitho?’ asked Florry, archly.

‘Ah, you sly little puss! No, I shan’t tell you what my little plan is, but I’m pretty sure it will do a great deal to make the course of true love run a little more smoothly; and as there is nothing like striking when the iron is hot—precious hot it was too when we last saw it—I’ll go at him this very evening. But, Warriner, my boy, until matters are a little more advanced, you must not be seen here by my old friend. It would exasperate him in his present frame of mind, and you must be off soon.’

‘Certainly. My only object in reappearing on the scene was to ascertain Mr. Buddlecombe’s condition, and to assure Florry that I had not been guilty of anything very outrageous.’

‘O, we both knew you hadn’t done anything wrong, Algy ; didn’t we, Mr. Bolitho ?’

‘Yes, yes ; of course we acquitted you, my dear boy, without a trial. Now, I dare say I’m a little in the way, am I not ?’

‘O, you could never be in the way, Mr. Bolitho !’ said Florence, her heart brimming over with gratitude to the old fellow.

‘Ah, that’s just what your father always says, my dear. But what I mean is, you’d like to say a few little confidential words to each other before you part ; wouldn’t you ? ’ll just go outside and keep *cave*, as we used to say at school, for your father may be back again at any moment.’

A few words should here be said in defence of Mr. Bolitho, against whom the serious charge of aiding and abetting a child in deceiving a parent might be brought by the reader. In conniving, however, at Florence’s clandestine engagement with Algernon War-riner, the old gentleman was doing what he thought right, taking into consideration that

Mr. Buddlecombe's fierce dogmatism, crotchets, and irritability—failings that seemed to increase every day—were not rendering the young girl's home as bright and happy as it should have been. Then, again, loving Florence as fondly as if she had been his own child, her happiness was the dearest wish of his heart; and this happiness he considered would rest on as secure a base as can be found upon earth, if she became the wife of Algernon Warriner.

'Now, when I cry out "*Cave!*"' said Mr. Bolitho, retiring towards the door, 'you take your departure through that window, my dear boy, and smoke another cigar in the grounds; and I'll join you in about a quarter of an hour afterwards and report progress.'

'Very well, all right,' said Warriner; adding, as Mr. Bolitho took up his position in the hall on outpost duty, 'Isn't he a first-rate old fellow, Florry?'

'O yes, he's always so kind!' said Florence.

However, they had something else to talk of besides old Bolitho.

'O Florry,' said Warriner, taking her hand in his, while the two gazed fondly at each other, 'how I have looked forward to this

moment, when, face to face, I could tell you——’

‘O Algy,’ murmured Florence, simultaneously, ‘how I have longed for an opportunity like this, when, safe from interruption, I could——’

‘*Cave!*’ said old Bolitho, rushing into the room, while in the distance Mr. Buddlecombe was heard approaching in high altercation with Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘The enemy is upon us. There are times when the British infantry must retreat, and this is one of them.’

So saying, Mr. Bolitho unceremoniously shoved Warriner, together with his hat and coat, through the French window and closed it after him, just a couple of moments before Mr. Buddlecombe entered.





CHAPTER III.

THE ENEMY CAPITULATES.

THE dramatic situation at the close of the last chapter was decidedly strong. As the lover went out at the window, the enraged parent came in at the door.

‘Not another word, Georgina!’ said the irate Mr. Buddlecombe, continuing the running fight which had been going on between himself and his wife down the stairs and all along the passages on their way back to the library; ‘not another word! I mean to assert my authority.’

‘And I mean to submit to it, Joshua, only up to that point where it continues to be lawful and just,’ returned Mrs. Buddlecombe,

decisively 'I've told your father everything, Florry dear,' she added, as Florence nestled up to her side.

'Florence,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, in the tones of a judge about to pronounce sentence on a hardened malefactor.

'Yes, papa,' faltered Florence, as she left her mother's side, and meekly stood with downcast eyes in front of her father.

'You had better go to your room at once and superintend the preparations for your departure. I have directed your maid to commence immediately packing up all that you will require for a prolonged stay from home.'

'O papa!' said Florence, with a start, and turning pale as she heard her sentence of banishment pronounced.

'Yes, you go to your aunt Virginia's in the North to-morrow morning at an early hour, escorted by me.'

'And I say she shall *not* go,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, advancing with a resolute air, and placing her arm round Florence as if to shield her. 'She is as much my child as yours, Joshua. She shall *not* go.'

With lowering brow, Mr. Buddlecombe was

about to assert his supremacy, when old Bolitho, who up to this moment had been surreptitiously fastening the window and drawing the curtains after Algernon's exit—covering his retreat, so to speak—came forward and threw himself into the van of the contest.

‘And I, Buddlecombe, on the grounds of our having been boys together——’

‘O, gracious!’ burst forth Mr. Buddlecombe, clapping both his hands to his ears and spinning round on his heels, ‘that is at least the second time within my recollection that you have made that remark!’

‘Well,’ said old Bolitho, warmly, ‘I’ll take up another position, that of Florry’s godfather, and in *that* capacity I object. And if that’s not sufficient, I’m a Fellow of the Royal Humane Society, and in the name of that useful and noble body I protest against the cruelty of sending this delicate little flower to droop and fade away under the chilling influence of that detestable old iceberg you call “Aunt Virginia.” I was once in her society for five minutes, and I had to drink three glasses of hot grog in rapid succession before I could get the chill out of my marrow.’

‘Well, upon my word!’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, folding his arms and surveying the three in front of him with a vain attempt to be calmly contemptuous. ‘This is rich, deliciously rich! Three to one! And those three the wife of my bosom, the child of my heart, and the friend of my youth!’

This enumeration of the odds was too much for Florence.

‘No, no, papa!’ she exclaimed, rushing to his side and placing her hands on his arm. ‘We are not all against you. I’ll be your own dutiful daughter. I’ll go, papa; I’ll obey you.’

Mr. Buddlecombe was not prepared for this, and there is no doubt that, by thus unexpectedly hauling down her colours, Florence did infinitely more execution than if she had nailed them to the mast and fought desperately.

‘Go back to your mother, Florence,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe severely, at the same time confessing to himself that this was the first shot in the campaign that had hit him.

Old Bolitho noticed and determined to follow up the advantage.

‘Leave him to me for a little; I know so well how to quiet him down,’ he whispered,

with many nods and winks to Florence and her mother. 'Buddle,' he added aloud, at the same time advancing towards the friend of his boyhood, 'I want to speak seriously to you.'

'The temptation, Bolitho, of hearing you speak seriously for once in your life is more than I can withstand,' was the not over-gracious rejoinder. 'What is it?'

'Well,' said Mr. Bolitho, drawing his disputatious old acquaintance on one side and speaking very confidentially, 'to begin with, Buddle, don't split.'

Mr. Buddlecombe whose temper was not particularly soothed at being dragged along by the elbow as if he were being 'run in,' turned sharp round, and angrily confronted the utterer of the forcible but not elegant figure of speech.

'Bolitho, *Bo-litho*, do I look as if I were going to split?' he asked, as he placed a thumb in each arm-hole of his waistcoat and glared furiously. 'I know what Bolitho means,' he added, in a low growl as he turned on his heel; 'but one has always to be on the defensive against his detestable familiarity.'

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ laughed Mr. Bolitho; ‘I say, Buddle, you’ll be the death of me some day Ha, ha, ha!’

‘I’ve often thought exactly the same thing myself,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, sadly; adding, with an air of resigned martyrdom, ‘This is Bolitho’s idea of a serious conversation; begins with a horrible slang school-boy expression, and continues with a guffaw that almost blows one’s head off.’

‘I mean, of course, Buddle, let what I’m going to say to you be between ourselves for the present. Now, you know I’m an old bachelor——’

‘Bolitho,’ interrupted Mr. Buddlecombe, with perhaps just a tinge of envy in his tones, ‘your lively disposition proclaims the fact more eloquently than words.’

‘An old bachelor with neither kith nor kin,’ went on Mr. Bolitho, too engrossed in his subject to heed the interruption. ‘Now you know, Buddle, what I’m worth as well as I do.’

‘Well, and what of that?’

‘What of that? Why, if Florry marries as I wish, I’ll leave her, with the exception of a few small legacies, every penny I’ve got. I

pledge you my sacred word of honour to that. And the husband I've got in my eye for her is young Warriner. There, put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

Accompanying this emphatic and figurative injunction with a hearty slap on the back, old Bolitho left Mr. Buddlecombe to his meditations, which ran pretty much as follow :

'With all his faults, and they are legion—confound him, my back is tingling still!—Joe Bolitho is rich, and his word is his bond. I begin to realise, too, that a pretty, young, unmarried daughter is a very disturbing element in a household. Why, all this will play the very deuce with one's digestive organs. I could never go through another evening like this. I don't know what to do.'

Here the poor gentleman's perplexities were gently interrupted by Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'Joshua,' said that lady, in a coaxing wheedling tone of voice, 'anyone seeing us together lately would suppose that we were anything but the loving united couple we are in reality. Why is it, Joshua?'

'Why is it?' repeated Mr. Buddlecombe, fiercely. 'Why, because of the confounded military. They've turned the whole of

Puddleton upside down, as I said they would; and you're standing on your head with the rest of the Puddleton population.'

'Well, Joshua,' returned Mrs. Buddlecombe, affectionately, 'let us heal the breach in the same way it was made—by the military. Why shouldn't we give Florry to this young Warriner? They have known and loved each other for some time, it appears. What more could we desire? He is clever, good-tempered, brave, handsome, well-born, not badly off, and has expectations.'

Thus driven in anticipation step by step from any worldly position he might have taken up, Mr. Buddlecombe assumed a moral one.

'Georgina, he took me in by a trick unworthy of a man of honour.'

'That was to win me over to his side, Joshua.'

'That makes it none the less a trick, Georgina.'

'Ah, Joshua,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, placing her cheek against her husband's shoulder and looking archly up into his face, 'do you recollect a certain young man, the soul of honour, who, to win the good opinion of a certain young lady's mother, descended to a

trick—a very nasty trick, too—filling his pockets with——’

‘Georgina, I did that for love of you,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, hastily cutting short the disagreeable reminiscence of his courtship.

‘Well, Joshua, *this* trick—which I am bound to say is a much nicer one than the mutton-chop stratagem—was all for love of Florry. Ah, Joshua, Joshua, don’t you know the old saying, “All’s fair in love and war”?’

Thus, by means of the Socratic or catechetical method of argument, was Mr. Buddlecombe driven into a corner from which there was no escape.

In the meantime old Bolitho and Florry were standing at the window in close consultation.

‘It’s all going on beautifully, Florry,’ said the former. ‘I can see your father is wavering.’

‘How kind you are, Mr. Bolitho!’ said Florence, gratefully. ‘How can we ever repay you for all this kindness?’

‘Nonsense, nonsense,’ said old Bolitho, who, like all really true-hearted people, disliked to hear his praises hymned. ‘I am doing it all for my own selfish gratification. There’s Algy, Florry.’

‘Where?’ was the eager inquiry, as Mr. Bolitho stealthily drew aside the window-curtain.

‘Over there under those trees.’

‘O yes, I see the end of his cigar!’ said Florence, rapturously. ‘I had no idea the end of a cigar was such a lovely object at night.’

‘Isn’t it?’ said old Bolitho, quietly laughing in his sleeve. ‘Quite takes the shine out of the “little star,” doesn’t it?’

“Twinkle, twinkle, bright cigar,
That tells us, Algy, where you are!”

Here a pantomimic intimation from Mrs. Buddlecombe that she was getting the best of the argument incited Mr. Bolitho to a more active participation in the contest.

‘Nothing like taking the bull by the horns. I’ll give him the *coup de grâce* at once,’ said the impetuous old gentleman, as he opened the window and dashed through it in quest of Algernon Warriner.

‘The enemy’s capitulated, my dear boy. Come in and shake your future father-in-law by the hand.’

Throwing away his cigar, Algernon at once

obeyed the summons; and in a few moments Mr. Buddlecombe, in a sort of dream, found himself once more confronted by the man, the sight of whom a short time before had meant apoplexy.

‘Mr. Buddlecombe,’ said the young soldier, in a frank manly way, ‘I beg to offer you my sincerest apologies for the disturbance I created in your household this evening. My whole defence lies in the old saying, “All’s fair in love and war.”’

Hardly realising what was transpiring, Mr. Buddlecombe—now a passive victim to force of circumstances—allowed his hand to be heartily shaken by the last speaker.

‘Dear me, what an effective and affecting *tableau*!’ said the irrepressible old Bolitho. ‘I feel inclined to do the heavy father and shower blessings all round. Hallo, here’s this morning’s London paper! I’ll take refuge in that.’

The hearty old gentleman had barely hidden the light of his fine rubicund countenance behind the paper—a proceeding which might be compared to an eclipse of the sun—when Spigot entered the room with an air of mystery, and so absorbed in the importance of

his mission as not to notice Algernon Warriner's presence.

'Your worship,' he confidentially whispered into the civic ear, 'the young gent from the barracks is prowling about the grounds with a cigar or a lighted lantern. We're not sure which, but rather fancy it's a lantern.'

'Spigot,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, eagerly, seizing the opportunity of having some one to let out at.

'Your worship,' said Spigot, putting his head on one side, and listening with a pleasantly expectant expression, which said, as plainly as words, 'His worship's about to compliment me on my vigilance.'

'I've travelled about, one way and another, to a considerable extent during my life.'

'You have indeed, your worship—Rams-gate, Margate, season-ticket to London, and, I believe, a voyage to Boulong.'

'But I might go on travelling from this to doomsday, without ever meeting such a block-head as you are.'

'Certainly not, your worship,' stammered Spigot, shuffling off in great confusion, which was not allayed by first running into Algernon Warriner, and then being run into by old Bo-

litho, who seemed to have suddenly gone clean out of his mind.

‘Hooray! hooray!’ cheered Mr. Bolitho, as he strode excitedly about the room, furiously waving the newspaper he held in his hand.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘Hooray!’ was all the answer vouchsafed. ‘To think now that I should have been the first to see it!’ continued Mr. Bolitho, going up to Algernon with a beaming countenance and outstretched hand. ‘Conquering hero, I must really shake your hand once more. No, I mustn’t. I should hurt you. I shouldn’t be able to moderate my congratulatory transports. I’ll kiss Florry instead, and she’ll pass it on at her earliest convenience.’

Here a report like the crack of a huntsman’s whip intimated, if nothing else did, that the old gentleman had suited the action to the word.

‘Yes; but what *is* it all about, Mr. Bolitho?’ asked Florence.

‘Why, listen.’

And here Mr. Bolitho read the following paragraph from the newspaper: ‘Her Majesty the Queen has been graciously pleased to con-

fer the recently instituted distinction of the Victoria Cross upon Captain Algernon Fitzmaurice Warriner, of the Queen's Own Fusiliers, for conspicuous gallantry before the enemy in the recent Crimean campaign.'

'O Algy, how proud I am of you!' exclaimed Florence, with glistening eye and mantling cheek.

'Ah, "None but the brave deserve the fair,"' said old Bolitho. 'To think now of my being the first to tell you, Warriner, my boy.'

'I knew it many days ago, Mr. Bolitho,' said Algernon, quietly.

'Knew it many days ago! Bless me, how coolly he takes it! Why didn't you tell us, then?'

'Because I had something else to think of,' was the reply, accompanied by a significant glance at Florence.

'Well, I can't take it so coolly, though I didn't win it, hang me if I can! Buddle, you should be proud of your future son-in-law!'

And here, in a paroxysm of excitement, Mr. Bolitho actually clapped the newspaper over the head of Puddleton's worshipful Mayor.

For a few moments manslaughter lowered

from every lineament of Mr. Buddlecombe's countenance, as it protruded through a rent in the advertisement-sheet, but the knowledge of his friend's irrepressibility soon led him to the homely conclusion that what cannot be cured must be endured.

'I should have been,' observed Mr. Buddlecombe, so resigned to his fate that he did not attempt to remove the paper, which adorned his neck something after the fashion of an Elizabethan ruffle, 'I should have been a much greater man than even Mayor of Puddleton, if it had not been for Bolitho. I feel that the best energies of my life have been wasted in one long futile effort to shut him up. It is useless to struggle against the inevitable. Let me try and submit with apparent cheerfulness to my sentence of perpetual Bolitho for life. Let *me* remark, by way of a change, Bolitho, that we were boys together.'



PART IV.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.



CHAPTER I.

L'HOMME PROPOSE.

THE London season of 1856, a little later than usual, owing to a general tarrying to witness the entry of the victorious Guards into London, was at its height, and amongst other important particulars connected with it, Lady Cecilia Warriner, widow of the late Colonel Warriner of the Grenadier Guards, sat on a certain evening at her toilet-table, undergoing the beautifying manipulation of her tire-woman. In plain language, Lady Cecilia was having her hair dressed. Regarding the particular style of *coiffure* at that period, my mind is steeped in an ignorance which is venial; for, as Addison remarked, ‘there is not so variable a thing in

Nature as a lady's headdress ;' and to be posted in the variations of so shifting a fashion is too much to expect from any chronicler except a Boswell or a Pepys. On the toilet-table, beside the glass, lay a letter as yet unopened, it having come to hand at a critical stage of the maid's operations, to wit, the concealment of a few 'silver threads amongst the gold.' The tell-tales, being at last arranged out of sight, were sufficiently out of mind to allow a cursory consideration of comparative trifles.

'A letter from Algernon,' murmured her ladyship, as she glanced at the post-mark. 'Poor dear boy, what a dreadful place to be quartered in ! Puddleton ! The very name communicates a shudder to one's frame. I am dreadfully anxious to hear how he is getting on amongst the barbarians.'

Notwithstanding this 'dreadful anxiety,' however, the 'poor dear boy's' letter lay intact until the finishing-touch had been given to Lady Cecilia's toilette, and then, as her fan and gloves were laid before her, she felt sufficiently at liberty to open the envelope.

Now all this does not mean that Lady Cecilia Warriner cared little for her son. It only means she cared rather less for him than for

the pomps and vanities of this world, and she might easily have done that and yet cared a great deal, which in truth she did. Furthermore, it must be added, in justice to her, that she had seen him since his return from the Crimea, he having proceeded to town on three days' leave for the express purpose of seeing his mother very soon after the triumphal entry of his regiment into Puddleton. Moreover, if ever vanity was excusable in a woman—and what woman has ever lived free from it?—Lady Cecilia had ample excuse for being vain. She seemed to possess the perennial beauty of Ninon de l'Enclos. Now, in the forty-third year of her age, and twenty-fifth of her reign, for she was still a reigning beauty, her loveliness, though of a different order, commanded as much admiration as in girlhood. London seasons, more than the lapse of Nature's seasons, had paled her cheeks. But what of that? The lily is as lovely as the rose. A few grey hairs now mingled with the auburn, but was not Froisette, the French maid, equal to that emergency? And even if she were not so at all times, is not silver more chaste than gold?

Having said thus much of Lady Cecilia

Warriner, the reader will readily understand that she still commanded a host of admirers at her feet. The senior on the list was old Sir Tripton Madingley, who had worshipped at her shrine for rather more than a quarter of a century. To be sure, he had paid court to lesser goddesses, and even married one; but Lady Cecilia had always occupied the highest niche in his temple of beauty.

Having perused her son's letter, gathered up her fan and gloves, and given one last approving glance at the mirror, this favoured daughter of Eve departed on her evening round of gaiety. Of course she was not going to waste all her magnificence on one entertainment. She dined at Carlton House Terrace, listened to some music in Park Lane, and finally put in an appearance at a ball in Belgrave Square. It was at this last scene that she encountered her old friend and admirer Sir Tripton Madingley. The old beau had been a lady's man, a trifler, all his days. Had he been antedated to the Middle Ages, his equipment for life's campaign would have been mainly comprised in a pouncet-box, a guitar, and a ladder of ropes. The number of women to whom he had individually addressed the

assurance, 'You are the only one I ever truly loved,' would have defied his own powers of computation, even with the aid of the most perfect system of mnemonics yet devised.

There was, however, one to whom this remark had been uttered with truth; and that singular person was Lady Cecilia. And when she had refused him for the sake of Charlie Warriner, then the reputed handsomest man in the Household Brigade, the discarded lover—as discarded lovers often do—had gone straightway and madly married some one else. There had been, however, this much of method in his madness, that the lady to whom he had offered his hand, if not his heart with it, had been, like the illfated heiress in the late gifted Mr. Robson's tragic lay, the only child of a rich merchant, 'with a very large fortune in silver and gold.' As may be supposed, Sir Tripton had not found the chain of matrimony particularly galling. He went his own line, and, as it was one which she could hardly follow, she took hers, and so matters went on smoothly enough. Indeed, they quarrelled far less than the most united couples generally do. In fact, they did not quarrel at all, for

'Theirs was the best of unions, past all doubt,
Which never meets, and therefore can't fall out.'

Within a few years of the marriage—not a particularly happy one for the lady—the wealthy heiress had died, leaving her husband, as the expression goes, a pledge of their mutual affection. The blow, as may be imagined, had not been a particularly heavy one, and Sir Tripton had kissed the rod with almost as light a heart as he would have kissed a pretty girl. The pledge was now, at the period of this narrative—the *major* narrative, not this *minor* one—a young lady just introduced, and one of the largest prizes in the female matrimonial market. In her case there would be no tedious waiting for dead men’s shoes. Her maternal and mercantile relatives had, in a very businesslike manner, protected the bulk of her mother’s fortune from Sir Tripton’s somewhat squandering hands ; and, at twenty-one years of age, Agatha Madingley—such was her name—would become sole mistress of a vast accumulation.

Lady Cecilia had not long graced the ball with her dignified presence, when she was joined by Sir Tripton as she sat apart from the throng of dancers.

‘ How well Agatha is looking to-night ! ’ she remarked, after a while, as a tall graceful girl

passed at a little distance on the arm of her late partner in the dance.

‘Yes, she is improving, decidedly improving,’ said Sir Tripton.

‘Algernon is coming up to-morrow for a few days,’ continued Lady Cecilia, with a certain significance.

‘Ah, indeed!’ was the response, in tones which betokened that this was by no means the first time the speakers had conversationally coupled the two young people together.

‘Yes, I heard from him this evening, just before I left home.’

‘Comes up to-morrow, eh?’ repeated Sir Tripton, meditatively. ‘Then our little plot thickens with the appearance of the hero on the scene.’

‘Yes; at all events it must be thick enough for the two principal actors not to see through it at first. For if there is a circumstance calculated to breed mutual detestation in the minds of two young people, it is the knowledge that their respective parents have destined them for each other.’

‘Undoubtedly so,’ acquiesced Sir Tripton. ‘Now I mean to kindle the first spark of love for Algy in Agatha’s bosom directly we get

home. I shall lead her by the hand into the library, and, in a voice trembling with suppressed emotion, I shall ask her if she is particularly anxious to bring her father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave--not that I've got any,' hurriedly interpolated the old beau, as he gracefully ran his fingers through his dyed locks. 'Mere figure of speech. Now I think I may safely predict that Agatha's reply will be in the negative. "Then beware of young Algernon Warriner," I shall say. "Fall in love with any male of the human species but that particular young man, and receive a father's blessing. But fall in love with that particular young man, and know the bitterness of a father's curse."'

'But is not that carrying the doctrine of contrariety a little too far?' asked Lady Cecilia, with a languid smile.

'Not in the least. Was it not the forbidden fruit that was most longed for? She'll go to bed, dream of him all night, and wake up desperately in love with him in the morning. And if you, my dear Lady Cecilia, will only pursue a similar course with Algy regarding Agatha, the two will be ready to rush into each other's arms at the very first oppor-

tunity, with mutual protestations of undying love on their lips.'

'But are you quite sure Agatha may not be secretly contemplating matrimony on her own account?' said Lady Cecilia. 'Girls, you know, especially those without mothers, sometimes arrive at such conclusions independently of paternal assistance.'

'O dear, no! Besides, even if she has, directly I tell her that she is quite at liberty to marry anyone *but* Algy, she won't care two pins for anyone else. These young foolish things all know and believe in the hackneyed saying that true love never runs smooth; and conversely they imagine that no love which *does* run smooth can be true, or, what is more taking to their ideas, romantic. And if it is not for the sake of money or romance, it is, in a large majority of cases, for some trifling reason that girls marry. If you could get half a dozen young married women into the Palace of Truth, and ask them one after the other why they had entered into the holy bonds of wedlock, you would get these answers, or something like them—No. 1: "I married because papa was so ridiculous as to object to my dancing five times in the evening with the

same man, and I thought if I married I'd be able to do as I pleased in such matters." No. 2: "I married because Georgie Smith got engaged, and I was *determined* she shouldn't be married before me." No. 3: "I married because widows' caps are so sweetly becoming, and I wanted to take the first step towards qualifying for one." No. 4: "I married because I was afraid people would think I had never been asked." No. 5: "I married because I loved——"

'Ah, there you have the good old-fashioned reason at last; it is quite refreshing,' said Lady Cecilia, who had been leaning back in her chair, looking at her ancient adorer over the top of her fan, and lazily condescending to be amused by his volatile prattle, as she had been on occasions of this kind for the last quarter of a century.

'Don't be in such a hurry, my dear Lady Cecilia. The fair confessor was going to say "another." In other words, married out of spite. But seriously, and to return to our former subject, are you sure Master Algy has not already chosen for himself? I've answered for my child; can you answer for yours?'

‘O, quite. Algernon is not one of those young men who find a dart in every pretty face. When he once gives his love I feel certain it will be given for ever and aye, and people capable of giving such love as this are very chary of bestowing it. Besides, what opportunity has he had of losing his heart, even if it were of the most susceptible nature?—which I am sure it is not. He went straight from school to his regiment; and for the two years between joining and going out to the Crimea he was, when not engaged with his professional duties, too much engrossed in field-sports for falling in love. He is not likely to have seen any especially fascinating young damsel in the Crimea, I should think; and to imagine that at Puddleton, where he has been since his return, there can be any girl for whom a son of mine could care, is too preposterous.’

‘Of course it is,’ acquiesced the old dandy. ‘We may safely dismiss from our minds all fear of danger from Buddledon, or whatever the name of the place is. And now, having satisfactorily disposed of all obstacles, we may look on the matter as an accomplished fact. Ah, Lady Cecilia, “marriages are made in

heaven." And "heaven is here, where Juliet is."

Here our Romeo, who had 'just enough of learning to misquote,' shot a furious 'œillade' at the fortress which had withstood his twenty-five years' siege.

'Well,' said Lady Cecilia, calmly ignoring the tender glance, 'Algernon will arrive in the middle of the day. You and Agatha had better come and lunch with us.'

The invitation was accepted; and Lady Cecilia, being tired, anachronistically wished her hostess 'good-night' at three o'clock in the morning, and was escorted to her carriage by Sir Tripton.

'Good-night, my dear Lady Cecilia,' he tenderly murmured, as he pressed her hand through the open window of the brougham.

'You should say "good-morning," was the reply. 'It is broad day'

'No; not when you are going away,' said the old beau, looking unutterable things. "Your absence makes the night, your presence brings the day." Consequently Night, black-browed Night, now frowns upon me as your horses, like the steeds of Phaeton, are about to bear away the bright luminary which

will not again gild my path of life until—I turn up at lunch to-morrow.’

This anti-climax was caused by the steeds of Phaeton making a sudden snatch forward at their collars in their anxiety to get home, and carrying off the bright luminary of Sir Tripton’s existence, and very nearly his toes as well. Without the slightest hesitation, however, Sir Tripton declined the Jugger-nautic performance of crushing himself or any portion of himself beneath his idol, and, nimbly skipping backwards, stood fondly watching the hind wheels until they turned a corner.

As Sir Tripton’s dyed locks pressed his pillow a couple of hours later, the coming event, as he regarded his daughter’s betrothal to Algernon Warriner, produced in him a frame of mind which may best be described as jubilant.

Now why all this self-congratulation? For really the disposal of a good-looking young heiress to a young gentleman of moderate means and expectations is not a thing of such difficulty as to render its accomplishment a matter of rejoicing on the part of the young

lady's father, whatever the feelings of the young gentleman's parents may be. The answer lies rather deeper than we have yet penetrated into Sir Tripton's nature. His constant regard for Lady Cecilia was about the most reputable element of his composition, inasmuch as it had been the least variable. In the youthful heyday of his career as a man of fashion, Lady Cecilia was the only woman he had ever seen with whom he felt he could settle down as a respectable member of society; and now, in his frivolous old age, when frivolity was indulged in only because it was second nature, and not for the pleasure it gave, there was still the same conviction that Lady Cecilia was the only one for whom he could feel that love which would sweeten a more serious and consequently a better mode of life. Or shall we put it in another way, and say, gild the bitter pill of that old age which could not be staved off, however much it might be disguised, by dentists, perruquiers, tailors, and vendors of hair-dye?

That the cold statuesque beauty and manner of Lady Cecilia should have enthralled so lastingly a sunny volatile temperament like Sir Tripton's, is a psychological anomaly of

constant recurrence in life. The assertion by one of the greatest of our old poets, that woman loves herself in man, may or may not be true ; but, on the other hand, there is little doubt that man generally loves his opposite in woman. Even physically this is the case. A very big man generally marries a very little woman ; and your human tomtit evidently considers his destiny is matrimony with an ostrich of a woman. Though ever ready to meet the ardent ones half-way, the glowing Sir Tripton, in his heart of hearts, evidently thought with Byron, that :

‘Your cold women are beyond all price
When once you’ve broken their confounded ice.’





CHAPTER II.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

THE meeting between mother and son was affectionate, and Lady Cecilia was unusually demonstrative over it. Her heart, though desperately full of worldliness, was still a mother's heart, and as such it could not but swell with pure loving pride as she surveyed her handsome and gallant young son. There is no such health-restorer as happiness, and for the last few days Algernon Warriner had lived in an Elysium. His face, when Lady Cecilia had last seen it, had been wan and drawn with months of suffering, but now the glow of health was once more on his check.

‘If Agatha doesn’t lose her heart to him,

she hasn't got one,' she thought. 'You will meet some old friends at luncheon, Algernon,' she added aloud, with considerably more meaning in her words than met the ear addressed.

'Old friends?' said Algernon, gaily; 'delighted to hear it. I believe in "auld lang syne."' Who are they?

'Sir Tripton Madingley and his daughter. This is her first season.'

'Sir Tripton, eh?' said Algernon, laughing, for the old beau had always been a joke with him. 'And what's the daughter grown like? I haven't seen her since she was a little girl in frocks. I should think *chaperon* to a marriageable young lady was not exactly old Sir Tripton's most congenial *rôle*.'

'Agatha is a very nice girl; seems to be admired; but she's hardly my style of beauty, and hardly yours, I should think,' replied Lady Cecilia, carelessly; for well did she know that this was one of those cases in which 'faint praise' does not 'damn.' It is much better to expect little and be agreeably surprised, than to expect much and be disappointed. 'At all events,' continued Lady Cecilia, 'it will be quite refreshing to you to

meet people in society again; for of course, Algernon, you have no acquaintances amongst the people of Puddleton ?

‘Haven’t I, though!’ said Algernon, warmly. ‘Amongst others, there’s as fine a specimen of a hearty old English gentleman as I ever met with—a jolly old boy of the name of Bolitho.’

‘Never heard of him,’ said Lady Cecilia, as if her words were equivalent to a sentence of social ostracism. ‘But now that I *do* hear of him, his name gives one the idea that he’s always dancing a hornpipe.’

‘Well, he’s jolly enough, I can assure you, without that perpetual motion.’

‘Very likely. Jollity is by no means an unusual concomitant of vulgarity,’ said Lady Cecilia, superciliously.

‘But he is not vulgar,’ retorted Algernon, with warmth.

‘So be it, Algernon. Heated arguments over trifles are. He is not vulgar.’

‘No; unless goodness of heart, unbounded generosity, love of his fellow-creatures and of his country are vulgar; and then is he the vilest creature that ever walked the earth.’

‘Well, I have heard of love at first sight,

Algernon, and I am not prepared to say that there is no such a thing; but friendship, I should have imagined, was a sentiment of a somewhat slower growth. If, however, there was a spot in England unfavourable to the rapid development of this mushroomlike friendship in the breast of a son of mine, I should have thought that spot was Puddleton. Friendship, especially sudden friendship, between two people, is generally born of a congeniality in tastes and pursuits; and that you should find a kindred spirit in Puddleton is to me a surprise, and I admit not a pleasant one. Pray, have you any more Puddleton friends besides Mr. Bolero?' concluded Lady Cecilia, who had a contemptuous way of not being troubled to call people out of her own set by their right names.

'Yes, I have—the Mayor of Puddleton and his family.'

'Dear me, Algernon! The Mayor of Puddleton and his family! Well, I confess that does not raise the same lively picture to my mind's eye as the name of your friend Mr. Bopeepo did.'

'Well then, my dear mother, I'll draw the family picture for you.'

‘If you consider it necessary to do so, Algernon, or it will afford you the least pleasure, I shall submit to the delineation with, at all events, the consolation that I am acquiring knowledge on a subject of which I have hitherto been singularly ignorant ; for I confess,’ continued Lady Cecilia, who in her girlhood had been a Maid of Honour, ‘that in my mind a mayor and his family are nothing more than mere abstract ideas. A mayor is something with an instrument of torture called an address which he uses unsparingly ; a mayor’s wife is something very much overdressed, who stands by awkwardly bowing ; a mayor’s daughter is something frightened out of its wits that presents a bouquet ; and a mayor’s son—well, I don’t think he has ever obtruded himself on my mind, even in the abstract ; but I suppose that he is something that does something with a ledger somewhere.’

‘You will shortly know a little more of the *genus*,’ said Algernon ; ‘for I may as well tell you at once that it is mainly on a subject very closely connected with the Mayor of Puddleton and myself that I have come up to talk to you about.’

‘O, I know,’ said Lady Cecilia, languidly. ‘But, my dear Algernon, it is high time you should give up these boyish pranks.’

‘I really don’t understand you, my dear mother.’

‘Why, I recollect now that the mayor of a town is also its chief magistrate ; and you have got into some scrape with him—pulled his door-knocker off, or put out all the lamps in the main street ; something of that sort—and you’ve promised fifty pounds to some local charity as compensation, and you have not any spare cash at your agent’s. Am I not right ? Of course, I must be. For what other subject could possibly bring you and the Mayor of Puddleton into close intercourse ?’

‘But *there is* another subject—a tender subject, a sacred subject, a subject dearer to me than life,’ replied Algernon Warriner, with an earnestness that for a few moments startled his mother out of her usual repose.

‘Algernon, what do you mean ?’ she asked, leaning forward and gazing with almost breathless interest into his face.

‘I mean,’ said Algernon, with soldier-like brevity, as he came to the point rather quicker than when opening up the same subject in his

memorable ante-prandial interview with Mr. Buddlecombe, 'I mean that I love his daughter.'

The announcement was as disagreeable as it was unexpected. Anger, disappointment, and all the bitterness of shattered hopes filled Lady Cecilia's breast ; but she was not one to 'unpack her heart with words.' Silently she leaned back in her chair, and an expression of disgust, as if some noisome reptile had crossed her path, came into her face.

'Yes, mother,' said Algernon Warriner, keenly feeling the silent and bitter contempt more on account of the girl he loved than on his own. 'Yes, one of those things who, half frightened out of their wits, present bouquets, has, to my great happiness and honour, promised to be my wife.'

'I see how the case stands, though I should have thought you had had more strength of mind,' said Lady Cecilia. 'You have not, you *cannot* have been a free agent in this contemptible piece of folly. You have been wheedled, flattered, coaxed, entrapped into it by this wily old Mayor ; for in such cases it is the designing parent more than the comparatively innocent decoy who lands the weak victim.'

In the midst of his chagrin Algy Warriner

could not repress a smile at the idea of Mr. Buddlecombe's wiles and blandishments. He felt it expedient to dispel the illusion.

'At the first interview I ever had with my wily entrapper he wheedled me by keeping me waiting on his doorstep for about twenty minutes; his fulsome flattery took the form of calling me an impostor; and he coaxed me to the extent of threatening to have me tarred and feathered for daring to propose to his daughter.'

'Are these phrases mere figures of speech?' asked Lady Cecilia, in cold hard tones; 'or do they convey matters of fact?'

'They are simple and unvarnished truths.'

'Algernon, I blush for you.'

Neither was this remark a mere figure of speech. Lady Cecilia's usually pale face was covered from neck to brow with an angry flush.

'Come, mother,' said Algernon, 'my mind is made up; the thing is as good as done; what's the use of crying over spilt milk?'

'But I do not call it *spilt* milk,' said Lady Cecilia, so carried away for the moment as to adopt her son's homely metaphor. 'It is milk deliberately, madly, wantonly poured into the gutter.'

Never in his life had Algernon Warriner seen his mother betray such symptoms of anger. He was the last man in the world to prolong, if he could help it, the pain of a wounded spirit, least of all his own mother's; and, though there was an angry flush on his face, he spoke the soft word which he hoped would turn away her wrath.

'I mentioned how my suit had been received not to cause you anger or pain, but to show you how thoroughly in earnest I have been in my love; for I can assure you, my dear mother, I relish insult as little as you do. Come, mother,' he added, placing his hand on her shoulder with a gentle tenderness, 'it was to tell you of this in all filial duty and affection that I came up to town.'

With icy deliberation she put his hand away.

'Algernon,' she said, rising from her seat, and planting her right foot on the floor with a quicker motion than usually characterised her gestures—Lady Cecilia was incapable of stamping—'Algernon, you shall never marry this girl.'

'Never, mother?'

'Never, with *my* consent.'

‘Then, mother, I must marry her without.’

Lady Cecilia inclined her head with cold stateliness.

‘Then we need say nothing more to each other on the subject,’ she remarked.





CHAPTER III.

A KNAVE OF HEARTS.

‘**N**OW, Agatha,’ said Sir Tripton Madingley, as he drove his daughter in his mail-phæton to Lady Cecilia’s residence, ‘remember what I told you last night, or rather this morning, when we got home from the ball.’

‘What, about young Warriner, papa?’

‘Yes. *Always* lay to heart whatever your father tells you, my child; but in *this* particular instance be especially mindful of my injunctions. Now, you must not be surprised to see me friendly and cordial with Algernon Warriner; for remember, in the first place, I have known him from infancy; in the second, he has just returned from a victorious campaign,

in which, whatever his faults may be, he has shown the most conspicuous gallantry, and he deserves a hearty welcome from his countrymen, especially his old friends.'

'Well, papa,' returned Agatha, 'though I've not seen him since we were both children, still I am an old friend; so *I* ought to welcome him heartily too.'

Sir Tripton was obliged to correct an imaginary shy on the part of the near horse in order to hide a chuckle, as he thought, 'I have struck the first spark already; my knowledge of the female heart in all its workings and ramifications is something marvellous.'

'Agatha,' he said severely, at the same time handling the reins as if about to pull up sharp, 'I've a great mind to turn round and drive you straight home again.'

'Why, what have I said or done so very dreadful?'

'Said? Why, have you not dropped an expression which shows me that you are far from entertaining that abhorrence towards Algernon Warriner which my words of this morning should have created in the bosom of any right-minded girl? I tell you, Agatha, you must close your heart to even the very

most infinitesimally minute feeling of friendship for that young man.'

'But why, papa? Surely there can be no harm in my being at all events friendly with a man who is a friend of yours?'

'Yes, there is—a deuce of a lot of harm. In my case the friendship could never ripen into any warmer feeling. With *you* it could. And the day, Agatha, that love for Algernon Warriner were to creep into *your* heart, love for you would fly out of *this* poor broken one.'

Here Sir Tripton indicated the organ in question with the butt-end of his whip, wiped an imaginary tear from his left eye, and winked his right at a pretty face passing along the pavement.

'Good gracious, papa, how positively ridiculous you are!' exclaimed Agatha, who was a high-spirited girl, and waxed impatient at all this supererogatory warning from a danger she considered herself perfectly safe from. 'One would really think, to hear you going on like this, that I was a girl ready to fall in love with every man I came across.'

'You may,' quickly interposed Sir Tripton, 'with every man but one, and I need hardly add that one is Algernon Warriner.'

‘Well, come now, papa, supposing I *was* to fall in love with Algernon Warriner, what then?’

Sir Tripton shook his head—not quickly, for fear of disarranging his curls—and assumed a heartbroken look, as he replied :

‘Then grief and shame would turn your father’s raven hair snow-white in a week.’

(Soap and water would have done it in five minutes.)

After drawing this melancholy picture of paternal woe in its outward and capillary form, Sir Tripton was again obliged to turn his head to hide another wink, as he soliloquised :

‘I’ll be bound she’s half in love with him now. Egad, I haven’t broken so many women’s hearts without knowing what’s inside of them.’

It must not be supposed that Sir Tripton, with all his faults, was the diabolical old reprobate which this soliloquy of his would at first sight make him out to be. He probably did not believe in broken hearts at all, and thought the Roman motto, *Flecti non frangi*, described them pretty accurately. Or, if he *did* believe in broken hearts, he also believed in their wondrous aptitude for mending themselves again. A woman’s so-called love-broken heart

never failed, he considered, to avail itself of the course pointed out by Donna Julia,

‘To love again, and be again undone,’

continuing the process from time to time as occasion demanded, until it became so case-hardened as not to be able to ‘love again.’

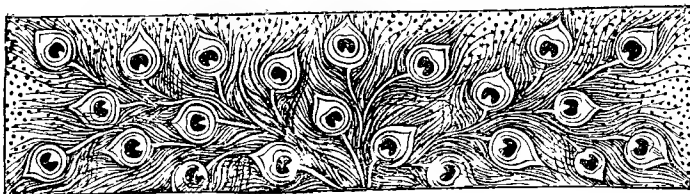
This somewhat unpleasant retrospect of Sir Tripton’s along the primrose path of dalliance which he had trod for so many years was suddenly dispelled by the worthier reflection that, while thus in his worldly wisdom fanning the flame of love with a bucket of cold water, so to speak, he must be careful that Algernon Warriner’s social reputation did not suffer in the process.

‘Agatha,’ he remarked, with this object in view, ‘whatever I have said in disparagement of Algernon Warriner must be between you and myself. It is my duty to have warned you. But let others guard their own ewe-lambs from the fangs of the wolf. Remember, Agatha, not a word of this to anyone. Promise me, my child.’

The required promise having been given, Sir Tripton fell into a tender reverie regarding

Lady Cecilia, which lasted—with just a few transient interruptions as a pretty face, a fine figure, or a neat ankle crossed his vision—until he drew up before the door of the temple dedicated to the worship of St. Cecilia.





CHAPTER IV.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

FOR the first few days after that memorable evening when his consent to his daughter's union with one of the hated sons of Mars had been wrung from him, Mr. Buddlecombe's mental equilibrium was, if not upset, decidedly shaken. After all he had thought and said and done with regard to the military, it was so hard to realise what had happened, that his attempts to do so brought him at times to the verge of temporary insanity. He could not go back from his word, and yet to keep his word would be about as glaring an instance of self-stultification as any individual had ever offered to the world's scorn. What would Puddleton

say when Puddleton heard how its Mayor, who had all but cursed his people for not opposing the advent of the military, had been the first to give his daughter, his only child, in marriage to one of the red-coated strangers? Would it not be enough to make Puddleton point the finger of scorn and shoot out the tongue of derision at him? Would not Puddleton crack its sides with laughter? And is not ridicule harder to face than physical danger? Men who will stand up before the children of Anak will flee from a mortal Momus of the puniest stature. Puddleton's wrath Mr. Buddlecombe could have faced, but not Puddleton's mirth; Puddleton's fist, but not Puddleton's finger. In this difficulty it occurred to him to steer a middle course, which, while it would save him from destruction in the Scylla of his broken word, would, for a time at all events, save him from being sucked into the Charybdis of Puddleton's ridicule. This course was secrecy for the present. 'Let it be a secret engagement until matters are a little more settled,' pleaded Mr. Buddlecombe the following morning; and the other side, feeling that they had really carried their point with a completeness and a rapidity far beyond their most sanguine

expectations, graciously acceded to this request. This was some relief, certainly, but still Mr. Buddlecombe was sorely troubled in his mind. He was merely postponing the evil day, and not putting it off altogether.

It was while in this frame of mind, longing to cancel the contract, and yet shrinking from a broken word, that Mr. Buddlecombe received at breakfast-time, two mornings after Algernon Warriner's visit to his mother, a sealed letter, marked 'Strictly private.' The envelope bore the postmark of Bradingfield, a large manufacturing town about fifteen miles from Puddleton; and Mr. Buddlecombe, having at a glance mastered this fact, broke the seal, and proceed to peruse the contents as follows:

'White Hart Hotel, Bradingfield.

'SIR,

'Up to a few days ago I had as little knowledge of your existence as you probably had of mine. The force of extraordinary circumstances, however, has brought what had apparently been the parallel lines of our respective lives into temporary contact—I,

as the mother of Algernon Warriner, and you, as the father of the young lady to whom he has successfully made proposals of marriage. He informs me that though you have given your consent, it was wrung from you unwillingly, and that you entertain the strongest objections to the alliance. Believe me, sir, *your* objections to this marriage cannot outweigh *mine*. It occurs to me that in a private conversation together we could possibly arrange some combined course of action which might avert a transaction we each of us regard with so much distaste; and it is with the object of obtaining, as soon as possible, a personal interview with you, that I have travelled to this town. For obvious reasons it is best, or I should rather say it is an absolute necessity, that our proceedings in this matter should be conducted with the strictest secrecy. I have therefore come to this town instead of to the one where you reside and my son is quartered. I have taken the further precaution of travelling *incognito*, and I am known here as "Mrs. Harding." In the event of your not responding to my proposition in the spirit I hope for, I trust to your honour not to divulge

to a single creature the contents of this letter.

‘I remain, sir,

‘Yours obediently,

‘CECILIA WARRINER.’

‘What’s that enormously long letter about, Joshua?’ asked Mrs. Buddlecombe, as her husband, the workings of whose expressive countenance she had been watching with intense curiosity, put the epistle into his inside breast-pocket, and then buttoned up his coat with an air as if defying all efforts to wrest the document from him.

Mr. Buddlecombe looked confused, and then sought to hide his confusion with the reply churlish :

‘Nothing to you, Georgina.’

‘But it must be something to me if it’s anything to you, Joshua,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, whose conjugal breast was perturbed not only by foiled curiosity. ‘A letter which you peruse with the staring eyes and vivid complexion of a boiled lobster must be of sufficient interest for your wife to justify her in asking what it is about. And you cannot plead the excuse that it’s on business, and

therefore I should not understand it, for I see it is in the handwriting of a lady'—this last statement being accompanied by a toss of the head.

From the reply churlish Mr. Buddlecombe proceeded to the counter-check quarrelsome :

‘Hold your tongue, Georgina.’

Mrs. Buddlecombe *did* hold her tongue. But if a woman holds her tongue, particularly when she is told to do so, depend upon it the silence is terribly significant.

‘I have but one simile, and that’s a blunder,
For wordless woman, which is *silent* thunder.’

All through the meal Mr. Buddlecombe was strangely *distract*. He put a pat of butter into his tea, and tried to spread a lump of sugar on his toast. He attempted more than once to read his napkin, and wiped his mouth with the newspaper.

After finishing his breakfast Mr. Buddlecombe repaired to his study, and there read the letter over again. The results of the second perusal were that he called for his boots, walked hurriedly to the railway-station, took a first-class return ticket for Bradinglefield, arrived there in due time, walked to the White Hart Hotel, and inquired for Mrs. Harding.

‘Who shall I say, sir?’ asked the waiter.

‘Mr. Bud—ahem—say a gentleman who heard from the lady this morning; that will be quite sufficient,’ replied Mr. Buddlecombe, who thought it better to follow his fair fellow-conspirator’s lead, and not divulge his identity.

The waiter retired, and, after a few minutes, returned with the message, obtained through the medium of the chambermaid, that the lady had not yet left her room, but that if the gentleman would be good enough to wait she would see him shortly.

‘Will you step up into the lady’s private sitting-room, sir?’ added the waiter.

Hotel-waiters never ask people to *walk* this, that, or the other way. They invite them to *step* up, down, or into.

Mr. Buddlecombe stepped up, as desired, into a private room, where he was left for a considerable period in solitary grandeur; for, with his usual impetuosity, he had paid rather an earlier visit than Lady Cecilia was prepared for, and without the maid Froisette, whose services had of course been dispensed with for the time being, the operations of the *toilette* were considerably prolonged.

At last they terminated, and Lady Cecilia

entered the sitting-room, pale, proud, self-possessed, and beautiful.

‘Mr. Buddlecombe, I presume,’ she said, with just the slightest possible deviation from her bodily perpendicular, as that gentleman faced round from the window, out of which he had been looking, and bowed stiffly. ‘Pray be seated,’ she continued, as a second bow, even stiffer than the first, intimated that her presumption was correct.

Mr. Buddlecombe seated himself on the very edge of a chair, as if he only sat *pro formá*, and not as an acceptance of any civility on the part of his hostess, while she took her seat opposite.

‘I am much obliged to you for so promptly replying in person to my letter,’ said Lady Cecilia, who, so far, was having all the talking to herself; for, in truth, Mr. Buddlecombe was as yet completely taken aback by the unexpected youth and beauty of his fair correspondent, ‘and it leads me to expect your co-operation in the course I am about to propose to you.’

‘Promptitude and energy have ever characterised my actions, or I should not have attained the very high position I now hold,’

said Mr. Buddlecombe, just to remind her that no nose, no matter how aristocratic or exquisitely chiselled, should be turned up at a mayor or anything connected with him.

For all the effect, however, that his remark had, the face opposite to him might have been, for impassiveness as well as faultlessness of outline, a masterpiece from the hands of Praxiteles.

‘But,’ continued Mr. Buddlecombe, ‘if on the present occasion I have shown even more than my usual promptitude, it has no doubt arisen out of my extreme anxiety to guard my daughter from a *mésalliance*.’

Herein Mr. Buddlecombe was rude, not to say gratuitously impertinent; but to give him his due, it must be explained that he made the remark, not so much because he wanted to be rude as because he fully expected it would be made to him, and he thought he would be first in the field with it.

It is a way of the world—this prospective *lex talionis*. Brown often cuts Jones for no other reason under the sun than that he thinks Jones is going to cut him. And Smith frequently snubs Robinson, with whom he would gladly fraternise, because he thinks Robinson

is about to snub him. This is the real secret of a great deal of rudeness in all classes of society.

‘I have already been informed that you regard this match with disfavour,’ returned Lady Cecilia, without the slightest symptom of temper, whatever she may have felt. ‘I said as much in my letter to you. Indeed, I should not have sought this interview had I not had that reason for supposing you would aid and abet me in my efforts to prevent the projected alliance.’

Mr. Buddlecombe felt rather like a small boy who has thrown a piece of mud at a white marble statue and missed it. Or would it give a better notion of Mr. Buddlecombe’s feelings to compare them with those of the gentleman who fired a bullet point-blank into an apparition, and had his missile calmly and politely returned to him? He coughed uneasily, and, warned by an ominous creak from his chair that he had better put as much of his pride in his pocket as would admit of his sitting a little farther back, did so.

‘Now,’ continued the statuesque beauty, in the same calm dispassionate strain, ‘the first step is to get these infatuated young people

away from each other's influence. I have sufficient interest at the Horse Guards to get my son ordered away from Puddleton on some immediate and special service. I have already seen his colonel, who, fortunately, was in town, and he will offer no opposition. I can thus answer to get my son out of the way for the present. Can you do the same with regard to your daughter? Pray do not think I wish to pry into your family matters. I merely ask the question in my anxiety to further your views as well as my own on this point. Is there any relation to whom you might send your daughter, and from whom she would receive no encouragement in this romantic fancy?

Mr. Buddlecombe thought of 'Aunt Virginia in the North,' that bugbear of poor Florence's young life, and he replied, 'I have,' with a grimness which might mark a person replying in the affirmative to the query, 'Have you such a thing as a guillotine at home?'

'So far, that is satisfactory,' said Lady Cecilia. 'We may now look upon what might be called the deed of separation as an accomplished fact.'

‘But they will write to each other,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘I have thought of that. It is the next point to be considered.’

‘And a very knotty one too,’ interposed Mr. Buddlecombe.

‘Quite so. But the solution of the difficulty lies more in your hands than in mine.’

‘Does it, indeed?’

‘Yes. I cannot prevent my son from writing to your daughter, but it is quite within your power to prevent her from receiving what he writes.’

As Lady Cecilia said this, a little of the frigid self-possession deserted her, and a faint flush suffused her pale face. All through the interview Mr. Buddlecombe had experienced an uncomfortable feeling that he was not only playing second fiddle, but that his fiddle was an instrument of a very inferior description. He felt he now had a chance of performing on the first Straduaris in the loftiest strain. He accordingly tuned up, and scraped away in a high moral key:

‘No matter how ardently I may wish for this match to be broken off, I am nevertheless not quite prepared to go to the length

of intercepting the letters written to my daughter by the man I have consented to recognise as her accepted suitor, even though that consent was obtained from me under false pretences—I may say, wrung from me by force.’

Lady Cecilia winced for a moment, and the faint flush deepened; but she speedily resumed the game with consummate skill.

‘I should imagine that you would have considered a consent extorted from you under the circumstances you mention as hardly binding on your conscience. Of course, we must never judge solely by appearances; and I have your own assurance that you have been an unwilling participator in this matter; but you must excuse me when I say it does not look very like it.’

Mr. Buddlecombe rose greedily at the fly which the expert angler had thrown, and gorged it.

‘If you think, madam—as your manner implies you do—that my repugnance to this engagement is not genuine, let me most emphatically state that you are mightily mistaken. To guard myself from further misapprehension I must speak plainly. I regard this union with such unfeigned detestation that

I will leave no stone unturned to avert it. I admit being at first carried away by a mistaken sense of duty; but I now see it would be worse than folly on my part to regard the trumpery effusions of a love-sick puppy in any more serious light than as rubbish for the dustbin, and I shall take precious good care they find their way there without any intermediate delay of passing through my daughter's hands. I promise you that, madam. The idea of hinting that I'm not in earnest, indeed, when I say I detest the thought of this union! The thing is preposterous!

Mr. Buddlecombe had thus far vented his indignation, and played very nicely into Lady Cecilia's hands, when a slight scuffle was heard outside the door.

'Stand aside, I tell you; I *shall* enter this room. I have a right, a sacred right, to follow,' said a voice, which caused Mr. Buddlecombe to rise from his chair with not altogether pleased surprise.

Then ensued a short struggle over the door-handle, and then, *mirabile dictu*, Mrs. Buddlecombe, who had evidently got the best of the encounter with a little pale-faced waiter—more on the principle perhaps that weight is

might, than that right is—burst into the room with a precipitation that was due not so much to indignation as to the fact that the battle of the door-handle had ended in a victory for her rather more suddenly than had been altogether anticipated.

The good lady's presence was not so strange after all, and is, on psychological grounds, easily accounted for. The long letter in a female hand; its effect on Mr. Buddlecombe; his snappish refusal to give her the slightest information as to its contents; his subsequent abstraction surpassing anything of the kind she had ever noticed in him before; his mysterious disappearance after breakfast — all united in creating a turmoil of jealousy which, with an undercurrent of curiosity, raised such a heavy sea of troubles in Mrs. Buddlecombe's bosom, that she determined at once to take up arms against them, and by opposing end them. Anything was better than to go on enduring those 'damned moments' 'twixt doting and doubting. For Mrs. Buddlecombe, notwithstanding an occasional matrimonial skirmish, was a true and fondly-loving wife. She made up her mind to follow Mr. Buddlecombe, and to settle her doubts one way or the other.

There was no difficulty in the first part of the proceeding. Mr. Buddlecombe was as easily traced in Puddleton and its environs as the Monument would be in London, if it took it into its head some fine day to glide off to the West-end.

In the first moment after entering the room, Mrs. Buddlecombe's eyes glanced from her husband to Lady Cecilia, and the beauty of the latter at once redoubled those jealous torments to which she had been a prey ever since the receipt of that letter at breakfast-time.

‘O!’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe: and it is really wonderful the amount of meaning that can be thrown into this little monosyllable on certain occasions. Mrs. Buddlecombe evidently thought so, for she repeated this rhetorical *multum in parvo*.

Consciousness that appearances are against one's innocence is often quite as disconcerting as conscious guilt itself; and our worthy Mayor of Puddleton, though as innocent as any man could be of the charges he read in his wife's flashing eyes and excited demeanour, wore an air of detected gallantry.

‘My dear, what on earth brings you here?’ he mildly stammered; for, like many excitable

people, he hated what is called a 'scene,' if it was not of his own making, and he detected symptoms of such a storm brewing as had never yet burst upon his head. He did not object to a 'row' now and then; but he preferred it, like his bread, home-made. Moreover, it is one thing laying the rod over people when you know they will kiss it, and another when you see they are quite ready to return the strokes double-fold.

'I need not ask what has brought *you* here, Joshua,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, with a furious glance at the lovely face which she took for the magnet of attraction.

'Nonsense, Georgina! you're making a mountain of a molehill.'

'You may well compare this transaction of yours to a molehill,' said poor dear Mrs. Buddlecombe, quivering in the grasp of the green-eyed monster; 'for a molehill is the result of a sneaking, grovelling, underhand, low proceeding on the part of a debased animal. There!'

'I tell you, Georgina, the ridiculous notions you have got into that head of yours are absolutely groundless.'

'If there is nothing wrong, what is there to

be ashamed of? And if there is nothing to be ashamed of, why all this secrecy and mystery in the meeting with this—this individual?’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, with another furious glance at the beautiful face which she thought had weaned her Joshua’s affections from their lawful object.

‘Don’t make an idiot of yourself,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, astonishment and confusion now giving way to wrath. ‘I tell you again that your notions are beyond the bounds of possibility.’

‘But jealous souls will not be answered so.’

‘Seeing is believing,’ half-sobbed Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘I call it scandalous! an assignation! At your time of life, too! O Joshua!’

Here poor Mrs. Buddlecombe, worn out by her morning’s exertions as an amateur detective, and sick at heart with grief and rage, sank to the sofa, and, having buried her face in her handkerchief, became hysterical.

At this point Lady Cecilia, who had been surveying the intruder with silent scorn, rose from her seat, and with calm dignity moved to the door.

‘We have fortunately arranged all that is necessary for the present,’ she said, in an undertone, as she passed Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘Remember your promise about the letters.’

Now, notwithstanding that Mrs. Buddlecombe was busily engaged in an hysterical performance, and that her head was buried in her handkerchief, she nevertheless, through a peephole in the embroidery, managed to keep a jealous eye on the movements of the enemy, and she thus witnessed this surreptitious piece of confidence. This was making ‘assurance doubly sure.’ It was the last link in the chain of evidence, proving to her beyond a doubt that an understanding which would not bear the light of a wife’s countenance existed between the two.

‘Abandoned creature, how dare you carry on your intrigue with my husband before my very eyes?’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, rising from the sofa and stamping her foot, while Mr. Buddlecombe betrayed unmistakable symptoms of getting the steam up for an explosion.

Lady Cecilia paused, calmly turned round, and, fixing her assailant with a vacant stare, *à la* Lady Clara Vere de Vere, sought to slay

her with her noble birth, after the manner of the afore-mentioned heartless young lady Of this latter advantage, however, Mrs. Buddlecombe was completely ignorant, and the shaft was harmless.

‘Yes, you may be beautiful, but you’re bad!’ she cried, in an hysterical burst.

Her manners had not that repose which Lady Cecilia’s had.

‘You wicked woman, parading and flashing before my very eyes your diamonds, bought, I suppose, with my miserable husband’s money, as if you were glorying over me!’ continued the excited lady, beginning the long sentence with a scream, and ending it in a wail, as the supposed destroyer of her domestic happiness gathered up her skirt with a richly-jewelled hand, and swept from the room in silent contempt.

Five minutes afterwards the Mayor of Puddleton strode along the streets of Bradingfield, on his way to the railway-station. His hat was pressed over his eyes, his fists were clenched, and the deep mutterings which escaped his compressed lips caused the passers-by to turn round and watch the rapidly reced-

ing figure with feelings of pity, pain, sorrow, anger, or amusement, according to their individual views on the subject of strong language.

On Mr. Buddlecombe's way to Puddleton in the train, a mild old gentleman, sitting opposite to him, feebly dropped an observation on the fineness of the day, and he shortly after registered a vow that he would never again, as long as he lived, make use of such an insulting remark to a perfect stranger.

On arriving at his home, Mr. Buddlecombe's wrath reached its zenith, or rather, as passion is by no means an exalted sentiment, it would be more correct to say, sank to its nadir.

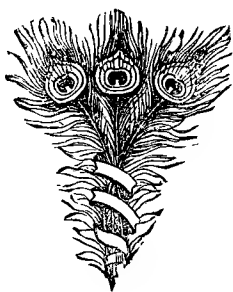
'Those accursed military!' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe, as he dashed his hat with all his might on the tessellated floor of his hall. 'Every bit of all this can be traced back to them. I *always* said, from the moment I heard they were coming to Puddleton, all our peace and happiness and respectability would be blighted. The slime of the military serpent is rendering our path of life foul and slippery beyond endurance. I could crush it under my heel.'

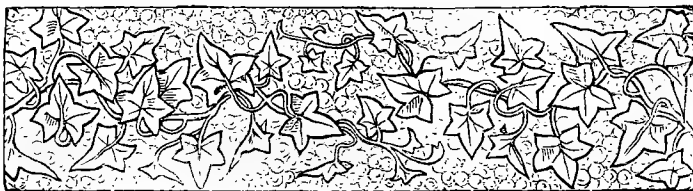
And here Mr. Buddlecombe applied that treatment to his hat, as if it had really been

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the reptile in point ; while Spigot stood looking on at the performance, trembling from head to foot, and murmuring, ‘ Certainly, your most worshipful worship.’

An hour afterwards Mrs. Buddlecombe returned from the White Hart Hotel, after having there sounded all the depths of female sympathy, from sal volatile to cardamoms, from cardamoms to burnt feathers, from burnt feathers to cognac, and from cognac to what was perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances, the most invigorating and refreshing restorative of all—a female chorus of abuse poured upon men in general, and husbands in particular, who were denounced as ‘ wicked deceivers, the whole lot of them, and not worth worrying and fretting about.’





CHAPTER V.

HUMBLE PIE.

THOUGH Lady Cecilia Warriner comported herself with such disdainful calmness through what had been, beyond all comparison, the most trying ordeal ever imposed upon her nerves or her pride, the iron had entered deeply into her soul. She felt almost stunned in spirit. Seldom had pride had such a fall, for it was not often that pride fell from such a height to so low a depth. To figure in such a scene as the one she had just passed through would have been, in her own estimation, a degradation, had she even played the first part. But to figure as an *intrigante* with an old button-manufacturer ! O, horrible, too horrible ! She

shuddered. She loathed herself to think that even in the diseased fancies of a jealous brain such a part should be assigned to her. She felt degraded.

But her cup of degradation was not yet full. That bumper of bitterness was yet in store for her. She was sitting in her room shortly after the departure of Mrs. Buddlecombe from the hotel, when the landlord knocked at the door, using his knuckles with an unnecessary force that was in itself an impertinence. Hardly awaiting a reply, he turned the handle and appeared in the doorway. He was a coarse, free-and-easy man, with a thin veneer of civility, which success was hourly rendering thinner. He was flashily dressed, and wore a gigantic Albert watch-guard, a style of jewellery which, I think, had only just then superseded the old-fashioned all-round-the-neck chain.

‘Who are you?’ asked Lady Cecilia, with a supercilious stare.

‘The landlord of this establishment,’ was the reply, with a smile, as he stroked his chin with one hand, and rattled his watch-chain with the other.

‘Retire at once,’ commanded Lady Cecilia;

‘and if you have anything to communicate send the chambermaid.’

‘O, I think we can dispense with all that ceremony,’ said the man, with a horribly significant insolence that crimsoned poor Lady Cecilia’s cheeks.

She was above bandying words with such a low brute, and quietly turned her back upon him.

‘I came myself,’ he continued, leaning an elbow against the framework of the door, and crossing one leg in front of the other; ‘for what I have to say had best come straight from me. It is to give you notice to quit my house at your earliest convenience. This establishment is conducted on principles of the strictest propriety, and after all the fuss and rumpus that’s occurred here this morning, I must request you to leave it. There’s a train starts for London in twenty minutes. You could go by that, couldn’t you?’

‘Go away and send the chambermaid at once.’

The man was nettled by the tones of command.

‘Ladies who dress as you do, and wear the magnificent rings you wear, if they are *real*

ladies, generally travel about with their own maids,' he said. 'However, I'll send the chambermaid up to help you to get your things together, and I hope you'll be ready for an early start. In the meantime, though, I'll trouble you to settle this little bill.'

A word more, a moment longer than could be avoided with this man, was abhorrent to Lady Cecilia. Not that she felt exactly angry. He did not rise to that point. We may shudder at contact with a worm, but we do not get angry with it. She never looked at the out-held bill, but produced from her purse a five-pound note, which she placed on the table.

'There,' she said, 'take the amount out of that, and give the balance to some local charity, if you have the honesty to do so.'

Your 'if' is not always such a peacemaker as Touchstone made out. The man was mollified by the first part of the sentence and the sight of the note, but the 'if' stung him into insolence again.

'Ah, thanks,' he said, taking up the note and scrutinising it, to see that it was not a flash one. 'I'll do what you wish. They're starting what they call a Magdalene Home in the

town here, and I'll give the balance to that as a very appropriate object.'

With this the ruffian retired, feeling as if he had performed a meritorious act.

Within a quarter of an hour Lady Cecilia walked through the hall to the fly on which her luggage had already been placed. There was quite a turn-out of the establishment to speed the parting guest, and a running fire of audible whispers and tittering greeted her progress.

'By George, she's a 'andsome woman, though, ain't she?' remarked a Bradingfield 'blood,' who had made about twenty thousand pounds, and fancied he was a gentleman.

'By gad, she is!' acquiesced his companion, who laboured under a similar wild hallucination with regard to himself, and was smoking a cigar at the bar. 'She's a regular screamer.'

'Horrid creature!' said the landlady, in tones meant to reach the ears they would most offend. 'P'r'aps she'll now know what style of 'ouses to keep her assassinations at in future.'

Even the white-faced wretched little waiter, who had grovelled before her on her arrival

the previous evening, flourished his napkin with the air of a Lothario in disguise, and winked at her, a performance of which its object remained in profound ignorance.

Like Marie Antoinette walking through the midst of the *canaille*, Lady Cecilia moved on with a dignity which nothing could debase.

‘Dear me,’ said the landlady, exasperated at the apparent impotence of her last envenomed shaft, and now having recourse to what she considered a stroke of the severest irony, ‘one would think she was a lady of title. John, show her ladyship out. He, he, he!’

John was the ‘Boots;’ and though his face was distorted into a grin when it was turned towards his mistress, it wore a respectful enough expression as he put it into the window of the fly and touched his cap.

‘Tell him to drive on at once,’ said Lady Cecilia, who had always left all such details of travel as ‘tipping’ to her servants, and failed to catch the true meaning of Boots’ civility.

‘Drive on,’ growled the disappointed suitor, banging the door of the fly, and further revenging himself by pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the receding vehicle, and making faces.

‘Well, I’m blowed,’ said the ostler, who stood by tainting the air with the redolence of the stable, and who deeply commiserated Boots in his misfortune, more especially as it was a sort of one which might overtake himself any hour of the day, ‘she carries ’er ’ead so ’igh they’d ought to put a martingale on her;’ a professional sally that elicited a good deal of merriment from the bystanders.*

For all her brave bearing, Lady Cecilia felt humbled to the dust.

‘Algernon,’ she said, as she threw herself back on the seat of the fly, ‘I shall never forgive you for having brought all this upon me.’

Had not Lady Cecilia brought it upon herself?

On arriving at the station she found that the train was on the point of starting, and on reaching the platform it was actually moving off; but so anxious was she to shake the dust of

* The reader must remember that all this happened in the land which Macaulay justly and wittily laughed at for its strange fits of ‘outrageous virtue;’ in the land where, a few years ago, a young lady, the sister of an undergraduate, was deported as a bad character, from one of our principal seats of learning, while paying a short visit to her brother there, on the all-sufficient and shocking grounds of having a pretty face and being fashionably dressed.

Bradingfield off her feet that she determined at all risks to seize the present opportunity of leaving the hated place for ever behind her. Her luggage was dragged into the guard's-van, and she herself was assisted into the nearest compartment, which happened to be one reserved for the use of smokers. There was but one other occupant, a young man, and she noticed that, though her presence was an invasion of his privileges, he silently and immediately threw away the cigar he had been smoking. It was not much to do, and was only what many gentlemen under the circumstances would have done, but to Lady Cecilia it seemed like the first glimpse of civilisation after passing through a land of savages.

'Thank you,' she said ; for she disliked the smell of a cigar in a confined space, and was really grateful for the small act of kindness.

The young man acknowledged her recognition of his trifling courtesy with a bow and a commonplace phrase, but his manner was full of that chivalrous respect for a woman which goes so far towards making a true gentleman. He might have served as an illustration of Rochefoucauld's not altogether incontestable maxim, that the air of gentle breeding is acquired most

easily in a camp, for the young man had just returned from the camp before Sebastopol, he happening to be one of Algernon's brother-officers, on his way up to London from Puddleton.

Lady Cecilia's proud spirit, that was proof against insult, now broke down under the first touch of true politeness. The tears that most women would have had recourse to long before now came to her relief. She turned her face, shielded it with her handkerchief, and for many miles of the journey cried in silent bitterness. The morning's work had humbled her to the dust. But humiliation is good for such as Lady Cecilia.

'It teaches them that they are flesh and blood ;
It also gently hints to them that others,
Although of clay, are yet not quite of mud ;
That urns and pipkins are but fragile brothers.'





CHAPTER VI.

LOVE LIES BLEEDING.

BY a vigorous figure of speech, which substituted the effect for the cause, an English archer was said to carry a dozen French or Scottish lives by his side. But, as an instrument of destiny, the mediæval archer's quiver sinks into insignificance compared with the bag of a modern postman. This humble wallet contains life and death, joy and sorrow, spite and benevolence, fortune and poverty, hope and despair. If it is often pregnant with blessings, it is also, *per contra*, a very Pandora's box for evils. To tell a person to put his head in a bag is generally thought to convey a hidden taunt, if not a direct insult. It is an expression, indeed, usually considered equivalent to the vulgar retort, 'Shut up!'

But how differently should this figure of speech sound to a metaphysical postman! To him it would suggest an expanding rather than a shutting-up process. For what an inexhaustible source of meditation might he not find in his bag, if he figuratively put his head into it! As a matter of fact, however, a postman is not metaphysical—which is all the better, perhaps, for that overwhelming majority of the public which likes its letters punctually delivered; and though at a festive season of the year his mind is apt to run on a certain box, it is not Pandora's.

We have seen how the particular postman who delivered Lady Cecilia's letter at the Mayor of Puddleton's home thereby sowed the seeds of jealousy, deceit, and rage. Alas, the same postman brought despair to an inmate of the same home. Sad to relate, the victim was poor little Florence.

The reader may have noticed that Mr. Budlecombe was rather fond of mentioning the not particularly interesting fact to outsiders, that his daughter had received an education on which no expense had been spared. Therein he alluded principally to a very select finishing school for young ladies in Germany, where

Florence had spent, happily and profitably, those two years of her life immediately preceding her eventful meeting with Algernon Warriner at Folkestone. The letter which came to her in the same bag that brought distrust and dissension to her parents was from a favourite schoolfellow who had been, in the gushing language of young ladies, her 'bosom friend.' On leaving school together this female edition of David and Jonathan had parted with mutual protestations of undying love; and then, as is so often the case between 'bosom friends,' they had quite lost sight of each other after a fervid correspondence lasting a whole fortnight. This renewal of friendship in its epistolary form, arrived, as the other important letter did, at breakfast-time. As Florence recognised the handwriting, an exclamation of joy escaped her, and the old tender feelings of friendship filled her heart with a rush. With glowing cheeks, sparkling eyes, and lips parted into a sweet soft smile, she perused the first page or so; then a wild look of horror came into the eyes, the colour forsook the cheeks, the lips still remained parted, but instead of a smile a half-stifled cry escaped them. For a few moments she appeared to be on the point

of fainting ; but she recovered herself. She felt she could not read on where she was ; and with a brave effort at keeping up appearances thrust the letter into her bosom, and forced a smile into her bloodless lips. She might have spared herself, poor little creature, this last effort ; for Mr. and Mrs. Buddlecombe were too much occupied with their own thoughts, as already described, to notice the sudden blight of misery which seemed to have fallen upon their child, and changed her in one moment from the picture of happiness to the very personification of leaden-eyed despair. The pallid face, the trembling hand, the suffused eye, the quivering lip, and the untasted breakfast, all of which, at any other time, would have called forth a burst of anxious sympathy, now neither elicited comment nor attracted notice. Though her heart was bursting, there was yet room in it to be thankful for this small mercy. She was afraid if she left the table, as she longed to do, that her mother might follow to see what was the matter ; and her heart was so sore and bruised that it shrank as yet from even the gentle touch of a mother's sympathy. So

‘She sat like Patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief,’

until Mr. Buddlecombe rose from the table and left the room, quickly followed by his wife. Then did Florence rush to her room, bolt the door, and tear the letter from her bosom. Without even waiting to throw herself into a seat, though her trembling limbs could hardly sustain her, she read as follows :

‘DARLING FLOSSIE,

‘What an age it is since we have written to each other ! And after all the promises, too, that we made about corresponding regularly once a week ! I wonder whose fault it has been ? I cannot say. But this I *can* say, that, though I’ve not written for all this enormously long time, I have often and often thought of you. We are leaving town in a few days for Belford Court, and you *must* come and spend as long as ever you can with us at once, and next season you must come to us in town. You can’t plead an engagement, for I have given you too long a notice to afford you that loophole of escape. I cannot make out how it is we have never met for so long a time. I fear, Flossie, the sudden plunge into all the gaieties and novelties of what some people call fashionable life must

have rather turned my head just at first, but something happened yesterday which has screwed it round all right again—at least, as far as you are concerned—and I at once resolved not to let another twenty-four hours pass without writing to you.

‘I must now tell you the main object of this letter is not so much to *assure* you of my undying affection as to *give* you some proof of it. And what surer proof of friendship can there be, Flossie, than to do all we can to guard those we love from even the possibility of harm? You know, in virtue of my year’s seniority, I used always in those dear old schooldays to exercise a sort of guardianship over you. Do you recollect, when that great fat German girl slapped you, how I pulled those two long flaxen bell-ropes she used to call hair until she yelled? It was awfully unladylike, I know, and I would not have done it for my own sake; but I did it for yours. Our place at Belford, where we are going to-morrow, and where I hope you will soon follow us, is as old-fashioned as the hills; and in the drawing-room there are great broad yellow-damask bell-ropes. Whenever I pull them, particularly if I am in a hurry, I always

think of the gallantry with which I rushed to your rescue. The old French proverb says, *L'amitié est l'amour sans ailes*. But in our friendship there *are* wings—a guardian angel's wings; for I am now going to fill my old rôle of guardian angel to you. I am not going to pull anybody's hair *this* time, though.

‘I am a long time in coming to the point; for I feel one moment as if I were going to do a very stupid thing, and the next as if I could do nothing else. Yesterday papa and I lunched with a certain Lady Cecilia Warriner, of whom I dare say you have never heard, unless I have mentioned her casually in our long confidential chats to each other, for I have known her from infancy. She is very beautiful, and I fancy is an old flame of papa's, if anything so cold can be called a flame. However, that's not what I want to write about. She has an only son, a Captain Algernon Warriner, and it is mainly about him that I wish to write. Beware of him, Flossie darling! Shun him as you would shun some deadly danger. I met him at his mother's yesterday for the first time since childhood. He is awfully good-looking, and as fascinating, I should think, as a serpent is said to be to a

poor little bird ; and directly I heard in the course of conversation at lunch yesterday that he was quartered at Puddleton, where I knew you to be, my soul sounded the alarm on your account.

‘ When I thought of your sweet little face, winning ways, affectionate disposition, and truthful confiding nature, and then looked at his handsome face, and knew what *he* was, I quite shuddered at the idea of your being thrown together. I am certain there is not a girl in Puddleton, or anywhere near it, who can hold a candle to you in looks ; and if your pretty face does allure him to your side, I can only hope and pray that you may not prove an instance of the saying that a pretty face is a woman’s greatest curse. But be warned in time, Flossie darling ! Have nothing to say to him from the very first, or you may bitterly repent it. I have had the story of Algernon Warriner’s worthlessness from the very best authority—my own father, who has known him ever since he was born. Now papa may be *tight*-laced, for his figure is most beautifully preserved ; but he most certainly is not what is called *strait*-laced. Quite the reverse. I don’t wish to say one

word in disparagement of poor dear papa ; but he is a regular man of the world, and the last one to be shocked or to think anything of a young man's crop of wild-oats ; and yet the state of virtuous indignation he worked himself up into about Algernon Warriner's iniquities—whatever they may be—was really something almost appalling. What I have told you by way of warning is mild and weak compared to the language in which his admonitions to me on this subject were couched. He actually told me he would sooner see me in my grave than know that I harboured even the slightest feeling of love for young Warriner. If papa thinks a young man bad, he must indeed be depraved. He must be something too awfully shocking even to think of. Why, there is old Lord Skampington, who regularly at the close of every season for the last fifteen years has eloped with a married woman ; in fact, his annual elopement is now, quite as much as Goodwood itself, the recognised conclusion of the London season ; and yet papa will persist in talking of this horrible loathsome old wretch as a very good fellow, and a man more sinned against than sinning.

‘I just mention this to show you that papa is by no means likely to take a prudish view of things. Gracious, what must Algernon War-riner be, then! I faithfully promised papa not to say a word to a soul about what he told me against this dreadful character. His very words were, “Let others guard their own ewe-lambs from the fangs of the wolf.” But when I heard that this handsome dangerous reprobate was quartered at Puddleton, and thought that you would therefore very likely be brought into contact with him, I determined to break my promise in order to put you on your guard. A broken promise is bad, Flossie darling, but a broken heart is worse.

‘Now, I dare say when you get this far you will burst out laughing, if you have not done so already, and think, as I did when papa poured forth the most fearful warnings against this individual, “What a nonsensical piece of fuss about nothing!” However, it *can’t* do any harm, and it *may* do a great deal of good. What an outrageously long letter I have written, to be sure! I must now rush off and dress for dinner. Write to me at once to say you are coming to us immediately at Belford Court. You *must* come! Let me know

what day to expect you. Good-bye, darling Flossie !

‘Ever your loving friend,
‘AGATHA MADINGLEY.’

Poor Florence’s feelings can be imagined as she read these words, which, stroke by stroke, shattered her idol. Never had iconoclast done his work more completely than had Agatha Madingley in the present instance. That she had acted in perfect good faith it is hardly necessary to inform the reader. She implicitly believed what her father had told her, for she could see no possible reason for disbelief ; and out of love for her little school-friend, whom chance had thrown in the path of danger, she raised her warning voice to the utmost of her ability. In justice, too, to Sir Tripton, it must be said that he would have been horrified to find that what had been merely a *ruse d’amour*, evolved from his deep and varied experiences of the female heart, was turning out as black a piece of work as even the filthy hand of Calumny had ever traced. Had the old *beau* foreseen the tangled web he was weaving, he would have left the loom as hastily as the Lady of Shalott when

she caught sight of Sir Lancelot's helmet-feather.

'O Aggie, Aggie, you've broken my heart!' gasped Florence, placing her hand on her side; then, her trembling limbs no longer able to support her, she sank to the ground, and, laying her head against her bed, sobbed bitterly.

To those who may think that Florence's heart returned a verdict of 'Guilty' on insufficient evidence, I would quote :

'Where love is great, the little doubts are fear;
Where little fears grow great, great love grows there.'

For a long time she remained in this position, too much stunned by the fearful blow to do anything but moan and sob. Her mind was like a dark abyss, impenetrable to reason. Her soul was, as it were, enveloped in a horrible black pall, shrouding from her mental gaze something too awful to be realised. And then, when her reasoning faculties recovered the first shock of grief, they brought her no consolation. The light of reason, on the contrary, showed her with a searing distinctness that there must be some truth in these charges against Algernon. 'Too good to be true' is a very old saying; but 'too bad to be *untrue*'

was the converse which held good on this occasion. Florence knew that Agatha Madingley was as true-hearted a girl as ever lived, and that she was incapable of so foul a slander as her communication would be were it not founded on fact. Might she not have been, however, while acting herself from the purest motives, a mere transmitter of the vilest scandal? The most honest mortal alive may be an utterer of base coin; Charity itself, with the most beautiful intentions, might seek to relieve Distress with a bad sovereign which would very soon land Distress in a police-cell: the moral of these reflections being that a friendly hand might unconsciously administer a poisonous draught. Such was the loophole of escape from her torture which presented itself to Florence one moment, only to be closed against her the next. No; Aggie Madingley had not gathered her information from an impure source likely to generate so foul an aspersion. She had had it direct from her own father, who had known Algernon Warriner from boyhood.

‘I will go to mamma,’ moaned poor Florence, feeling that if there was comfort anywhere upon earth it would be drawn from that spring

of sympathy which seldom runs dry—a mother's affection. Her efforts, however, to find Mrs. Buddlecombe elicited the information that that lady had gone out with considerable haste very soon after Mr. Buddlecombe's departure.

‘I will go to Mr. Bolitho, then,’ thought Florence, and, snatching her summer hat from its peg in the hall, she at once started. With hurried steps she traversed by a bypath the few fields separating Mr. Bolitho's comfortable villa from her father's more pretentious mansion, and soon arrived at her destination. At any time, but certainly not now, there was no initiative ceremony of ringing or knocking—the house, from basement to attic, was free to her; and on opening the door she confronted the old housekeeper, who happened to be going her morning's tour of inspection, and was subjecting the hall to a severe scrutiny in search of ‘matter in the wrong place.’ About Mr. Bolitho's house there was all the polish and cleanliness of a man-of-war or a prison, without any of their constraint or formality.

‘Good-morning, Miss Florry,’ said the old lady, relaxing her features into a bright welcome; contracting them, however, again, the next moment, into a shocked expression. ‘Lor’

bless me, how ill you do look, dear ! What-
ever *is* the matter ? Don't say there's any-
thing wrong with the Mayor, or your poor
dear ma !

' O no, thank you ; they are both quite well,'
replied Florry. ' Where is Mr. Bolitho ?'

' He is in the study,' said the old lady, with
a reverence in her voice, as if she were speak-
ing of a deity she worshipped. ' But, my
darling child, I never thought your sweet
bright little face could look like that,' she
added, taking Florry's hand in both hers and
stroking it, while she peered into the white
sorrow-stricken little face ; for many a time
and oft had Florry, as a baby, crowed and
kicked on the good old dame's lap.

Rewarding this tender sympathy with a kiss,
which brought the tears into the old lady's
eyes, Florry gently disengaged herself, and
hurried to the study.

' Dear, dear,' said the old housekeeper, as
she resumed her inspection, ' her face gave me
quite a turn ; I couldn't have been more
shocked if I had seen a cobweb over the hall-
door, or a speck of dust on *his* chair.'

As Florence burst into the study, Mr. Bolitho
rose with the flurried air of a detected forger,

and hurriedly thrust a paper into his desk. The crime this hoary-headed old scoundrel was perpetrating when thus taken *in flagrante delicto* was the inditement of a cheque for fifty pounds, in favour of a poor widow about whom he knew little more than that she was poor, struggling, and deserving. Had the bold, honest-looking signature, 'Joseph Bolitho,' which he had just executed with a flourish, been a forgery, he could not have concealed the document with greater hurry. He was one of the few who 'love to do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.'

'Why, Florry, you little rogue, what brings—— Bless my soul, what's the matter?'

Well might Mr. Bolitho change his key from pleasant banter to anxious surprise; for Florence, after vainly endeavouring to form a word with her quivering lips, had rushed into his arms, and burst out crying.

'Your mother and father, Florry—what of them?' he anxiously asked.

'The—the—they're all right!' sobbed Florry.

'Thank God!' was the fervent response.

'O Mr. Bolitho—Algy!'

'Algy! Well, well, what of him? For God's sake, what of him?'

‘I d-d-didn’t me-me-mean to say Algy,’ sobbed poor little Florence, as if her heart would break.

‘Good gracious, what’s the matter with the child?’ exclaimed old Bolitho, with a glance, all round the room, of hopeless bewilderment. ‘She ought to know who she’s crying her eyes out about. Then who *do* you mean?’

‘I—I mustn’t call him Algy any m-m-more!’

‘Then call him Algernon, if you think that prettier,’ said old Bolitho, in semi-idiotic tones.

‘He isn’t Algernon either!’ sobbed Florence.

‘O, isn’t he?’ said old Bolitho, in tones wholly idiotic this time.

‘No, he isn’t Algy or Algernon to me now.’

‘Then what the deuce is he?’

‘He’s Ca-Ca-Captain Warriner. Nothing more!’

‘Why the dickens isn’t he?’

‘Because—because—because he’s a bad man!’

Here Florence in a piteous wail reached the climax of her woful tale, if a few incoherent words, half-drowned in sobs and painful catchings of breath, can be called a recital.

‘Bad man!’ exclaimed old Bolitho with

sceptic warmth. 'Bad man be hanged ! Who told you he was a bad man ? Tell me who told you, and I'll make him eat his words ! I'll ram them down his throat, together with his front teeth, if they haven't already been knocked out, half a dozen times over, for defamation of character.'

'No one *told* me,' replied Florence. 'I heard it in a letter.'

'An infernal anonymous letter, I suppose. Tear it up, Florry, and throw it to the winds, together with all fears and doubts its vile poison has put into your heart. Calumny, my poor innocent little Florry, spares no one, least of all the noblest and the best. To us old ones in the world this is a truism ; to you, my guileless little one, it is a shocking discovery. And, further, let me tell you that anonymous letters are a favourite means in the foul hands of Calumny.'

'But the letter is *not* anonymous,' said Florence, piteously looking up into the kind old face beaming tenderly down upon her. 'It was written, too, by one whose truthful generous nature abhors calumny as much as yours does. You've often heard me speak of Agatha Madingley—not so much lately as

when I first came back from school in Germany. We loved and do love each other like sisters, and she is the truest-hearted girl that ever lived.'

'Yes, yes, yes; well, well?' said Mr. Bolitho, impatiently.

'Well, *she* wrote the letter. Her father is an old intimate friend of Algy's—I mean Algernon's—I mean Captain Warriner's mother, and has known him from childhood; and it is from him Aggie Madingley has had all this awful account.'

'Where's this letter? Show it to me,' said Mr. Bolitho, grimly serious.

In obedience to this behest Florence felt in her pocket, then in the bosom of her dress, and then in various other hiding-places afforded by the female style of dress; but to no avail.

'Good gracious! I must have dropped it on my way here, or left it at home! How careless of me! I could have sworn, though, I put it into my pocket. I must go back at once and look for it. I wouldn't, for all the world, that anyone but you or mamma saw it.'

'Stop, Florry dear, for a moment,' said Mr.

Bolitho, as Florence, in great tribulation of mind, hurried towards the door. 'Tell me first what this letter said. I can't stand the suspense of waiting till I see it.'

Only too well did Florence remember the terms of the impeachment, and she poured forth her little tale of woe in broken murmurs.

'I should not have believed it from anyone but Agatha Madingley,' she said at its conclusion.

'I don't believe it from *her*!'

'Don't you, Mr. Bolitho!' said Florence, with just a dash of hope faintly illumining her face.

'Devil a bit!' said the old fellow, shortly.

'O Mr. Bolitho, how sweet those lovely soft words seem to me!' said Florence.

Euphony, after all, lies more in the sense than in the sound. 'Not guilty,' uttered by a wheezy-voiced foreman, would sound much sweeter to the prisoner at the bar than an adverse verdict pronounced by a Mario in 'liquid notes mellifluously bland.'

'No, I don't believe it, and, what's more, I *won't* believe it until I get further proof,' said Mr. Bolitho. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll

ride up to the barracks at once, and see what I can pick up there in a cautious sort of way. So go home and get hold of that letter as soon as you can, and I'll be with you later on in the morning.'

Florence thanked her kind old friend and godfather, and took her departure with a somewhat lighter heart than she had brought to the interview ; while Mr. Bolitho ordered his cob to be saddled and brought round at once.

While retracing her steps across the field, Florence looked eagerly, but unsuccessfully, for the letter which she might have dropped.

On reaching home she found Spigot in the hall, ruefully contemplating a battered hat which he held in his hand.

'Whose hat is that, Spigot?' asked Florence.

'His worship's, miss,' replied Spigot, with bated breath and an uneasy glance in the direction of the study.

'Good gracious ! what has happened ?' she anxiously asked ; for the sight of a battered hat is apt to suggest probable injury to the head it usually shields from atmospheric and other influences.

‘ Well, you see, miss, his worship came in about a quarter of an hour ago ; and being not altogether exactly pleased about something, he put his foot on his hat, miss,’ replied Spigot, as if this subpedal operation with a hat was as natural and usual a manifestation of displeasure as a frown or a hasty word. ‘ But,’ added Spigot, whose terror of the great man lasted even in his dreams, ‘ what a blessing his worship’s head wasn’t in it at the time !’

The difficulty of any person treading on his hat while it was on his own head apparently not occurring to the faithful retainer.

On asking if her mother were in, Florence was answered in the negative ; and coming to the conclusion that a frame of mind which would crush hats was to be avoided, she hastily ascended to her room. On entering it she was relieved in her mind at finding the missing letter. It was lying open on the floor, where, in her dire grief and confusion, she had evidently dropped it while under the impression that she had slipped it into her pocket. Though so deeply had the written words sunk into her heart that she could have repeated them from memory, there was a fascination in reading them over and over again, in the fond

hope of convincing herself that the whole thing was a baseless as well as a base fabrication by which Agatha Madingley had been duped. But, on the contrary, even the hope that Mr. Bolitho's scepticism had inspired in her became with each perusal fainter and fainter, until it flickered out altogether, leaving her once more in the darkness of despair. And this, above all others, is a darkness like that which came 'over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be *felt*.' Then plaintively whimpering, 'O, I wonder if mamma has come in yet!' she rose and sought the only solace that seemed open to her now.

Mrs. Buddlecombe *had* come in, and was in her own room. Her frame of mind was hardly less miserable than her daughter's, but Florence's tear-bedimmed eyes were blind to the evidences of grief, anger, and fatigue amply portrayed in her mother's countenance.

With any but a soft or sympathetic expression of face did Mrs. Buddlecombe listen to the outpourings of the wounded spirit. Florence could not have gone to a more bitter adviser; for, after the morning's experience, Mrs. Buddlecombe, like the Psalmist, was saying in her heart, 'All men are liars.'

‘Do you believe it, darling mamma?’ asked Florence, after her mother had read the letter.

‘Yes; I can very easily believe every word of it,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, whose wholesome heart that morning’s work had turned to gall.

‘O mamma!’ groaned Florence, who knew well that her mother’s judgment ever leaned to the side of mercy, ‘I did not expect you would have believed it so easily. I thought you would as soon have believed ill of papa as of Algy.’

‘Ha, ha!’ half laughed, half cried Mrs. Buddlecombe, as she thought of her Joshua’s perfidy ‘They are all the same, Florence, these men. Young or old, single or married, they are one and all what the song says—“deceivers ever.” Have nothing whatever to do with one of the vile sex, Florry darling!’





CHAPTER VII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

A SLIGHT retrogression is necessary. While Florence was at Mr. Bolitho's, Mr. Buddlecombe suddenly be-thought him that perhaps a little nagging at his daughter might ease his troubled mind, or, at all events, divert his thoughts for a short time ; and with this object he wandered in search of her upstairs and downstairs, till he finally reached that young lady's chamber. Receiving no response to his tap, he opened the door and entered. On the floor was an open letter which at once attracted his attention.

‘What a careless girl she is, to be sure!’ observed Mr. Buddlecombe, stooping down and

picking up the letter, with the intention of putting it on the toilet-table. As he held it in his hand, however, his eye fell on the written words, and, as Fate would have it, those particular words were : ‘ I have heard the story of Algernon Warriner’s worthlessness from the very best authority.’ On this, curiosity getting the better of every other feeling, Mr. Buddlecombe read a few more sentences ; then, sternly muttering, ‘ It is my bounden duty to go further into this,’ he read the letter from beginning to end. He read it, too, with feelings of self-congratulation. It came in most opportunely. He wanted an excuse to give his own conscience for intercepting Algernon Warriner’s letters to Florence, and here was one, cut and dry, for him. It was now, without the slightest moral doubt, his bounden duty to stop all further intercourse by every means in his power, and the most efficacious were those suggested by Lady Cecilia.

Having come to this conclusion, he replaced the letter where he had found it, and once more retired to his study, where for the present we shall leave him.

Anxiously did Florence await Mr. Bolitho’s return from the barracks ; and on descrying

him from her window riding up the avenue, she hastened out to meet him.

‘O, Mr. Bolitho, have you heard anything?’ asked Florence, with an eager white face.

‘Well, I have some news of Algy; and this much I can say, that it affords a convincing proof of the high estimation he is held in at the Horse Guards. I consider it a most valuable evidence to character, and a practical refutation of the mischievous scandal that has occasioned you so much alarm and sorrow this morning.’

‘But what is it?’ asked Florence impatiently, and, in spite of Mr. Bolitho’s assurances, with considerable misgivings; for a piece of intelligence requiring a preface is pretty sure to have something unpleasant in it.

‘Well, in one way,’ replied Mr. Bolitho, patting her pale cheek, ‘the news may not be altogether welcome, Florry; for what I have to tell you involves a short separation between you two. The fact is, Algy has been ordered off at a few hours’ notice to Malta.’

‘To Malta!’ exclaimed Florence, clasping her hands.

‘Yes; I saw the Colonel, who has just

arrived from London by the midday train, and he told me all about it. It appears that the constant stream of troops passing through Malta, on their way from the Crimea, has thrown such a strain on the Quartermaster-General's department at that little military hotbed, as to almost break it down, and Algy, as a smart clever young officer, has been specially selected to go out to their assistance, with a title as long as my arm—Acting Deputy-Assistant Quartermaster-General, I think they call it. If the duties are at all commensurate with the title, the post must be a very onerous one. I suppose it didn't exist in Shakespeare's time, or he wouldn't have wanted to know what was in a name.'

This careless gaiety was assumed by Mr. Bolitho; for, in truth, there was something about this sudden order which, after what he had heard from Florence, produced, even in his unsuspecting nature, just the suspicion of a suspicion that a screw was loose somewhere. And when suspicion, even in the smallest degree, crept into Mr. Bolitho's heart, it was a substance so completely foreign to his nature as to create an abnormal irritation.

'Never mind, Florry,' he continued; 'he'll

only be away for a short time. You're certain to get a letter from him to-night, telling you all about it.'

By this time they were crossing a portion of the lawn immediately in front of Mrs. Buddlecombe's and Florry's boudoir, which, by means of French windows, opened on to the gravel path.

'O Mr. Bolitho!' called Mrs. Buddlecombe, suddenly appearing at one of the windows, 'do come in; I wish most particularly to speak to you. Florry darling, leave us alone for the present.'

'I've told mamma all about the letter, Mr. Bolitho,' murmured Florence. 'The dreadful weight of suspense and doubt and misery was more than I could bear all by myself, and I couldn't help going to you two; for I knew you both were so fond of Algy.'

'Quite right, quite right. But you'll hear to-night from him, my dear,' said the old fellow, patting her fondly on the shoulder. 'If she doesn't,' he added, as he obeyed Mrs. Buddlecombe's summons, 'I shall really think—well, I shan't know really *what* to think. That will be just about my mental condition regarding the matter.'

On entering the room, the traces of grief which lurked about Mrs. Buddlecombe's eyes and nose at once attracted Mr. Bolitho's attention.

'O, I *do* so wish to speak to you!' exclaimed Mrs. Buddlecombe, burying her face in her handkerchief. 'You are the oldest and kindest friend I have.'

'My dear, dear lady, you should not give way like this,' said Mr. Bolitho, who really thought that, considering the circumstances of the case, Mrs. Buddlecombe was carrying her maternal sympathy beyond the bounds of reason. 'I have heard the whole story, and permit me to say you are not acting with your usual admirable sense in at once taking the blackest view of the matter.'

'It's impossible to take too black a view of it,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, passionately.

'O pooh, pooh!' said old Bolitho, jauntily. 'I have heard the whole story, and I must say I don't agree with you.'

'Heard the whole story! Then you have seen him and he has told you?'

'No, no. I haven't seen *him*—at least not since this affair. I heard the whole thing from *her*.'

‘From *her*?’

‘Yes; why shouldn’t she tell me? She knows how I love her.’

‘Love her! *You* love her!’ gasped Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘You tell me you love her as well as Joshua?’

‘Bless my soul, what does all this mean? Love her as well as Joshua? Well, I know he loves her dearly, fondly——’

‘O, this to my face!’ sobbed Mrs. Buddlecombe, with her countenance once more buried in her handkerchief. ‘It is brutal!’

‘But hang me if I don’t believe I love her more than he does!’

Mrs. Buddlecombe rose from her seat, and, to use a Horatian metaphor, wrapped herself up in her virtue.

‘And this is the man from whom I expected consolation and advice!’ she said, in scathing tones, accompanied by a look of supreme contempt. ‘Mr. Bolitho, with that last speech of yours you have blotted out—and with a foul blot too—the friendship of years. After my triple experience of this day, everything in the shape of a man will henceforth be loathsome in my eyes. Leave me at once, please; and if chance throws us in each other’s way,

pray do not further insult me with any attempt to renew our acquaintance.'

'Well,' said old Bolitho, regularly gasping for breath in his bewilderment, 'conscious innocence, which is generally credited with such soothing properties, is, in my opinion, a humbug. I don't find it soothing me in the least—quite the reverse. What there can be so very disgraceful in my loving Florry as if she were my own daughter, I——'

'Florry! Who was talking of Florry?'

'Why, I was—of Florry and Algernon Warriner. Who were *you* talking about?'

'O Mr. Bolitho,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, in a burst of penitence, 'forgive me for my rude unfeeling words! The misunderstanding rose out of my selfish grief. I was not thinking of my poor darling little Florry, but of my own self. I thought all this time you were alluding to Joshua and that horribly lovely woman.'

'What horribly lovely woman?' said Mr. Bolitho.

'O, it's shocking!' replied Mrs. Buddlecombe, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief, and with difficulty restraining another fit of weeping. 'You are the only one to whom I would divulge this tale of shame. From

Florence of course it must be most sacredly kept.'

Mr. Bolitho was not a victim to idle curiosity, neither was he a lover of scandal; nevertheless he drew his chair nearer, and listened *arrectis auribus*. Mrs. Buddlecombe did not keep him waiting long.

'O Mr. Bolitho, I have found Joshua out in a *liaison* with a most lovely woman—I *must* admit that much of her, the vile creature!'

'I can't believe it,' said Mr. Bolitho, pushing his chair back half a foot, and gazing with horror on his informant. 'It's impossible. You've been imposed upon, my dear Mrs. Buddlecombe, by some foul lie.'

'Nothing of the sort,' returned Mrs. Buddlecombe; 'seeing is believing. I wish to goodness it wasn't. I traced him to the White Hart at Bradingfield, and surprised them in the midst of their assignation. I wish I had not, now. I prefer the state of blissful ignorance I was in yesterday. But now that I do know it, I cannot calmly submit to it. O Mr. Bolitho,' concluded Mrs. Buddlecombe, in a passionate appeal to her old friend, 'you have known him from boyhood; you have influence over him; win him—O, win my

poor erring Joshua back to the path of virtue !'

Mr. Bolitho was pierced to the very centre of his great tender heart. He was also shocked beyond measure ; for he entertained a very high opinion of the marriage vow—all the higher, possibly, for never having taken it himself ; and there was a grand air of steadfast resolve on his benevolent countenance as he replied, 'I will !' and strode from the room.

In a few moments he was at the study-door. But how he won, or sought to win, Mr. Buddlecombe back to the path of virtue must be reserved for another chapter.





CHAPTER VIII.

HAMMER AND TONGS.

IT is not extraordinary for persons to be blinded by their own tears ; but old Bolitho was frequently blinded by other people's. By 'other people' is of course meant women. Men's tears, from their rarity, are hardly worth taking into account. When men cry it is, in nine cases out of ten, dotage or drink, though there are occasions of course when a man can play the woman with his eyes without any slur on his manhood. If Mr. Bolitho had not been an old bachelor he might have taken matters more calmly ; but the mackintosh of matrimonial experience had not descended on his shoulders, rendering him waterproof to these bitter showers, and when-

ever one burst over him he was invariably drenched through and through by it. So, as he strode on his mission of winning Mr. Buddlecombe back to the path of virtue, he felt nothing, he saw nothing, but Mrs. Buddlecombe's tears, and he burned—as unslaked lime burns under the influence of water—to wipe her eye in one sense, and Mr. Buddlecombe's in another.

On arriving at the supposed Lothario's study-door, Mr. Bolitho applied his knuckles to it with a virtuous indignation that nearly sent them through the panel. Now to every gentleman there is something specially sacred about his study. No matter if he never performs any more important operation there than paring his nails or answering an invitation, he persists in looking at it as a hallowed spot dedicated to that immortal part of himself—his mind. Mr. Buddlecombe on this, as on most other points, was even more combustible than the generality of gentlemen, and to have his study-door thus rudely assailed amounted very nearly to a personal assault. So there was a great deal more than met the ear of Mr. Bolitho in the responsive 'Come in,' which, indeed, as far as pitch and tone

went, sounded a great deal more like 'Get out!'

'Bolitho,' snarled Mr. Buddlecombe, as the door was opened, 'I was under the impression that the use of the battering-ram had gone out with the fall of the Roman Empire; but you have just undeceived me.'

'Look here, Buddlecombe,' said old Bolitho, dropping the usual familiar 'Buddle,' and addressing the friend of his boyhood with marked severity by his patronymic in full, 'I'm not in the mood for bandying words. I have something serious to say to you—something *very* serious.'

'Have you really?' said Mr. Buddlecombe, still smarting under the affront to his study-door, and venting his wrath under a cloak of sarcasm which fitted him but indifferently well. 'Have you really, Bolitho? Now, does that mean you are going to prod me in the ribs, and then blow my head off with a guffaw?'

To this Mr. Bolitho did not deign to reply further than by a savage grunt, as he seized a chair, planted it violently on the floor exactly opposite to Mr. Buddlecombe, and, seating himself upon it, confronted that gentleman with a steadfast stare.

‘Allow me, Bolitho, to obtrude three facts on your consideration,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, still on the sarcastic tack. ‘First, that chairs are made of a frangible material called wood ; secondly, that they possess sufficient stability without ramming their legs through the floor ; and thirdly, that you are not sitting for your photograph, with me as the object on which to keep your eye fixed. You will excuse my candour,’ concluded the sarcastic gentleman, with the sort of sweet smile a dog gives you when you take a bone from him.

‘Yes, I’ll excuse your candour, if you’ve got any ; only too glad to do so ; but I don’t believe you can have a particle,’ was the reply.

For once in his life old Bolitho was in a towering rage, and while he boiled over, Mr. Buddlecombe simmered quite pleasantly in the consciousness of having at last done unto Bolitho what Bolitho had so often done unto him.

‘Keep your temper, my dear fellow,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, quite refreshed by the novel transposition of affairs. ‘At your age you should really exercise more control over your angry passions. You are fond of alluding to

the days when we were boys together; pray carry your reminiscences a stage further back to the days of your childhood, and lay to heart the lesson then taught you in the sweet little poem of "Let dogs delight."

I do not know whether it strikes the reader in the same light, but it seems to me that Mr. Buddlecombe lecturing old Bolitho on shortness of temper is about as exquisite a piece of inverted irony as Falstaff twitting the travellers on Gadshill with corpulency or Prince Hal with cowardice.

'I am not ashamed of being in a rage, sir,' retorted Mr. Bolitho, proving his statement by proclaiming it at the top of his voice. 'I *am* in a rage, sir, and it's only right and natural and proper to be in a rage, sir,' continued old Bolitho, *crescendoing* until he roared with righteous wrath.

'Look here, Bolitho,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, still pleasantly tickled, like a child with a fresh toy, by the brand-new sensation of keeping his temper while Bolitho had lost his, 'don't you think you somewhat miscalculate the acoustic properties of this apartment? It contains, I should think, not more than about fifty thousand cubic feet of space, and does not, there-

fore, absolutely require a voice of twenty trumpet-power in full blast to penetrate even to its farthest corner. I must again ask you to excuse my candour.'

'And I again tell you I don't believe you have any candour to be excused,' was the angry rejoinder. 'Is it candour to carry on a clandestine correspondence with a lady—a lady of dazzling personal attractions? Is it candour to make and keep an assignation with her, the purport of which you are unable to disclose to your wife? Is it candour——'

Here the catechism was cut short by Mr. Buddlecombe casting aside the polished rapier of sarcasm, with which he was ludicrously awkward, for the loaded bludgeon of abuse, a weapon he was more at home with.

'Mind your own business, you old fool!' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe.

A furious *tu quoque*, coupled with an asseveration that it *was* his business, rose to Mr. Bolitho's lips, when reason's voice, which up to now had been all but drowned in Mrs. Buddlecombe's tears, whispered to him that he must not be too sure of that; and, though the tones were still rather water-logged and weak, they induced Mr. Bolitho to pause and ponder

in this wise : Perhaps he *had* been hasty ; perhaps he *had* leaped without looking, and had consequently floundered into a quagmire of illusion , and, after all, might not Mr. Buddlecombe engage in some perfectly innocent transaction with a lady, concerning which it were better to be reticent with his wife, on the principle Harry Percy pursued towards his ‘ gentle Kate ’ ?—

‘ Constant you are ;

But yet a woman, and for secrecy

No lady closer ; for I well believe

Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know—

And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate.’

But there could not be the same objection to confidence in a man when that man had been a friend from boyhood. Such were pretty nearly the thoughts which Mr. Bolitho, with all traces of passion gone from his countenance, proceeded to put into words.

‘ Come, come, Buddle, old friend, I have been hasty. I have been led away by appearances, but I have no doubt you will be able in a few words to clear away the clouds of misapprehension, and put things in their proper light. Tell me the whole truth ; or, if you are bound by secrecy, it will be sufficient for me if you give your word that there is nothing

in the matter your wife or I, or any other honourable-minded man or woman, would consider wrong. I ask this more for Mrs. Buddlecombe's sake than for my own.'

Now, of the two persons, as the reader may well imagine, Mr. Buddlecombe would have preferred his wife as a confidant, had confession to one or the other been obligatory, and Mr. Bolitho's last move was a false one.

'Confound your assurance, sir!' thundered Mr. Buddlecombe, his ire rising as suddenly as Mr. Bolitho's had fallen—a see-saw by no means uncommon between two people having a difference of opinion. 'What right have you to demand an explanation of any course of conduct I may choose to pursue?'

'I have no right to demand one,' replied Bolitho, keeping his temper wonderfully well; 'but I should imagine that any victim of a groundless suspicion would be only too ready to give an explanation which would clear himself in the eyes of anyone, most of all in the eyes of the best of wives and the oldest of friends. By our old friendship, Buddlecombe, I ask you to give me this explanation.'

'And by our old friendship I won't do anything of the sort. Look here, Bolitho, it's my

opinion that that same friendship is so old that it's worn out—worn threadbare, sir, and the texture will no longer stand the strain of any prying impertinence or confounded familiarity. Do you understand me, or shall I endeavour to make my meaning plainer ?

Still old Bolitho kept his temper, and continued his remarks as if the insulting rejoinder to his appeal on the grounds of old friendship had not been spoken.

‘I admit there may be some good reason for withholding an explanation from your wife, because, with all their beautiful traits of character, women do not possess the knack of keeping a secret. But with me that objection cannot hold good.’

‘You want an explanation, do you ?’

‘Yes, I do ; and mainly in order that I may, if it's a good one, set your dear good wife's mind at rest.’

‘Then you may go to the Antipodes, or any other place you choose, in search of it, for you won't find it here. And the sooner you're off on your travels the better.’

Now old Bolitho's nature positively overflowed with the milk of human kindness, but there *was* a point when that milk could

become sour. Good-nature carried too far becomes contemptible. A man whom you could not kick into a rage would be—notwithstanding his undoubted claims to be considered an extraordinarily good-natured mortal—a very paltry fellow indeed. That Mr. Bolitho now lost his temper can no longer be denied.

‘There’s only one conclusion I can come to, then,’ he said, raising his voice and bringing his clenched fist down on the table with a mighty blow; ‘and considering your age, your position, your good charming wife, your sweet innocent daughter, and the pure home you have defiled, it’s my opinion that you’re a confounded old reprobate. Now, sir, do *you* understand *me*, or shall *I* endeavour to make *my* meaning plainer?’

‘Get out of my house, sir!’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, beside himself with passion, and trembling from head to foot, as he sprang to his feet. ‘I order you out of my house, sir! And if you won’t go, I’ll have you removed by force. There’s the door, sir; and I’d advise you to go peaceably through it, unless you prefer being thrown out of the window!’

As the accomplishment of Mr. Bolitho’s defenestration would have required a steam-

crane, beside other appliances, the absurdity of the threat deprived it of its offensiveness, and the old gentleman recovered a great deal of his temper as he walked towards the door.

‘There is no occasion, sir, to use force,’ he remarked, as he opened the door and turned round. ‘In the first place, I doubt whether the force you have at your command would be sufficient for the purpose ; in the second place, what has happened this morning is quite sufficient to induce me to leave your house of my own free will.’

The next moment the door had closed between the two quondam friends.

That evening’s post, so eagerly watched for, brought no tidings from Algernon Warriner to Florence. He had written her a long loving letter, telling her of his sudden departure for Malta, and begging her to write at once to him there ; but these written words, instead of gladdening the anguish-stricken soul of poor Florence, wasted their sweetness in minute fragments on the desert air of Mr. Buddlecombe’s wastepaper-basket.

There is a little to be said in extenuation of Mr. Buddlecombe’s conduct, and as it *is* so

very little, we had better give him the benefit of it. The day, teeming with provocation—for something bitter had risen with nearly every hour—had left him at its close barely accountable for his actions. In short, the effect on his excitable temperament had been such as to almost unhinge his mind for the time being, and render it, if not quite dead, singularly callous to all sense of right and wrong.





CHAPTER IX.

BLACK CLOUDS.

THE Buddlecombes were no longer a happy family, and as day succeeded day happiness seemed to sink lower and lower beneath the horizon as if steadily about to set for ever. A laugh, a merry jest, or a song was never now heard in the house. Old Joe Bolitho's voice never now re-echoed through it.

Mrs. Buddlecombe was by turns sad, morose, and passionate, according to the view she took, for the time being, of her imagined injury. Florence's poor aching heart was sick with hope deferred. The post never brought her the longed-for letter from the loved one; and this silence, together with his abrupt

departure and Agatha Madingley's letter, told her that she had been cast aside as soon as won. Any one of these circumstances without either of the other two would have left her, at all events, hopeful; but altogether, they closed every loophole through which the slightest glimpse of hope could be caught.

Mr. Buddlecombe was by no means the least miserable of the three. He often tried to lay the flattering unction to his soul that, under all the circumstances, he had done perfectly right, and was continuing to do perfectly right; for, like most other downward courses, his did not begin and end with one step. He tried, too, to find approval and comfort, to patch his reputation in his own eyes, with proverbs—that he was only cruel to be kind; that the means would be justified by the end; that the best surgeon was often he who cut the deepest, and so on. But the irrepressible still small voice within told him what hollow tricks these were he was trying to play upon himself. The loss of self-respect outweighed even the loss of his wife's love and of Florence's society.

In short, it was a miserable household. Jealousy, despair, and contempt of self—the

three most baneful cankers that can gnaw at the human heart—reigned supreme in it. The light of Mr. Bolitho's jolly old countenance never shone there now. He had at last taken offence; and though he and Mrs. Buddlecombe and Florence still continued to be knit in the strongest bonds of friendship, he never saw them except in their walks abroad or in his own home. This, too, was another source of unhappiness to Mr. Buddlecombe.

'I used to think,' he would often and often say in his heart at this period, 'that to get Joe Bolitho's back up would be about as pleasant a novelty as could possibly be devised; but now that I have accomplished the feat I can't say I enjoy it. I wish we were friends again, but of course *I* can't make the first advance, and I don't suppose *he* will. Though I knew that eels could become accustomed to being skinned, I should not have thought they would positively miss the operation if it were arrested; but I could fancy it now, judging from my own feelings. Bolitho's guffaw would sound quite musical in the house now, and one of his prods in the ribs would be positively invigorating.'

Even the efforts of the French cook failed

to give unalloyed pleasure, and the ante-prandial perusals of the *menu* were now sweet dreams of the past.

To the military Mr. Buddlecombe ascribed, immediately or remotely, all his trouble, and he waxed, if possible, more bitter than ever against them. But there was yet another trouble threatening, and most assuredly the military were not at the root of *this* evil. '*Et tu Brute!*' Mr. Buddlecombe might reproachfully have exclaimed to the gaunt spectre which now disturbed his peace of mind. The poor man's, quite as much as the rich man's, curse, the professional agitator, was at work in the manufacturing districts, of which Bradingfield and Puddleton were the centres; and trades-unions and strikes and riots were rife in the land. Already serious riots, accompanied by bloodshed, had occurred in Bradingfield, and Puddleton evinced dangerous symptoms of following the pernicious example.

In this complication of troubles and trials there was only one relief open to Mr. Buddlecombe, and that was to visit the sins of everybody on Spigot's head. Consequently that wretched man dragged on an aspen-like

existence, trembling in his shoes from the moment he put them on in the morning until he took them off at night.

One morning, about ten days after the eventful one which had brought such dire evil to the house of Buddlecombe, Florence, who about half an hour previously had started with the intention of paying her dear old godfather a visit, rushed into her mother's room in the keenest distress.

‘O mamma, darling mamma!’ she exclaimed, ‘we have lost our only stay and comfort now. Mr. Bolitho has gone!’

‘Gone!’ gasped Mrs. Buddlecombe, in blank dismay. ‘Gone where?’

‘No one knows. And the old housekeeper is crying her eyes out over it. She says he has been so low-spirited lately, which is such an extraordinary thing with him, that she thought the end of the world must be coming; and this morning early he went off quite unexpectedly, as if he had suddenly made up his mind. And when she asked him where he was going, and how long he would be away, he wouldn't give her any definite answer; but said it was very uncertain, and that we were

none of us to bother ourselves about him, as he might be away some time. It's all so awfully mysterious, isn't it? One doesn't know what to think.'

Here Florence, whose broken spirit was now only too prone to tears, buried her pale face in her handkerchief and cried bitterly

'O dear, O dear!' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, following suit, 'what *shall* we do without him? It was such a consolation to think there was one true man in the world, and that he was so near us. For there is an exception to every rule, and Mr. Bolitho is the exception to the rule that all men are wretches.'





CHAPTER X.

A SILVER LINING.

IT is quite a mistaken idea that whistling is necessarily a manifestation of joy or contentment. Neither does it indicate mental vacuity, as in the case of Dryden's Cymon, who 'whistled as he went for want of thought.' Some men often whistle with the persistency, if not with the *verve*, of a ploughboy o'er the lea when some vast scheme is straining their mental muscle to the utmost, or when worried and perplexed with trouble. I have no intention nor desire, nor probably ability—though no one knows what he can do until he tries—to write a disquisition on whistling. I merely wish that the reader may not imbibe the

erroneous impression that Algernon Warriner was light-hearted or light-headed, when I state that this gallant and smart young officer was whistling a subdued accompaniment to his footsteps as he strode across the ophthalmically dazzling parade-ground at Floriana in Malta on a certain morning some weeks after his arrival at 'the little military hothouse.' It certainly was not out of exuberance of spirits that he whistled. There was probably not a more miserable man in all Malta; except, perhaps, some Maltese contractor, who felt that the conclusion of peace had also been the conclusion of the most remunerative rascality he had ever been engaged in.

As Warriner continued his walk through the Puerto Reale and down the Strada of the same name, his mind was, I fear, not occupied, as perhaps it should have been, with the various details connected with the disembarkation of troops and stores, to superintend which was the duty he was now on his way to perform.

As he tramped down the Strada Reale, teeming with military life, he nodded cheerily enough to many a passing garrison acquaintance; but beneath the jaunty air was what a jaunty air so often covers—an aching heart.

He was tortured with suspense and worried with unpleasant conjectures. Not a letter had he received from Florence in reply to the numerous ones he had written to her; and where there is a great love there are also great fears, as I think I have already, in the course of this story, had occasion to remark, on the authority of Shakespeare. Then, too, he had lately become a prey to an uncomfortable suspicion that his sudden appointment and removal in hot haste to Malta, for the purpose of performing work well within the ability of any ordinary captain or subaltern in the garrison, was merely, through the agency of his mother's interest at the Horse Guard's, an artifice of hers to separate him from the girl he loved.

‘If I could only be certain of that,’ muttered Warriner to himself, as he continued his walk towards the harbour, where a garrison boat was waiting to take him off to a transport, ‘I’d throw up my appointment and go straight home by the next steamer.’

He was just turning this over in his mind, when some way down the street he descried a portly form clad in civilian's clothes, the proprietor of which was apparently asking his

way from an orderly The effect of the spectacle on Warriner was out of all proportion to its commonplace character; for though some of the Maltese laws are strange and arbitrary, there is no statute forbidding fat old gentlemen to walk in the streets of Malta, and if necessary to ask their way of any passer-by they may chance to meet. There was evidently, however, something very extraordinary in the sight of this especial old gentleman asking his way, at least to Warriner, for he stopped short, muttered, 'No, it can't be!' rubbed his eyes, said, 'Yes, it is;' added in the same breath, 'No, it isn't!' stepped out into the road to get a better view, ejaculating at the same time, 'Impossible!' then finally, with the exclamation, 'By Jove, it *is*!' bore down with full speed on the old gentleman.

'Mr. Bolitho! what brings you here?' exclaimed Warriner, seizing his old friend and admirer by the hand and shaking it heartily, while pleasure, surprise, and fear rose to his mind. The last feeling was uppermost, for the conspicuous absence of old Bolitho's usual jollity and frankness of manner filled the questioner with a dread that something was wrong.

‘Look here, Warriner,’ returned the old gentleman, ‘I’m a bad hand at beating about the bush. It is the blundering nature of the animal always to crash through it, brambles and all. Are you the truest-hearted bravest youngster that ever lived, as I used to think you were, or are you an unmitigated villain?’

‘I hope I am as little of the latter as I believe myself to be of the former,’ was the manly reply. ‘But look here, Mr. Bolitho, I am as bad at beating about the bush as you are. What news of Florry? All my letters to her are unanswered. Tell me what is the meaning of it.’

As Warriner put this last question, he seized Mr. Bolitho’s arm with a fierce grip and gazed eagerly into his face.

‘Do you really mean to say you have written to her?’ asked Mr. Bolitho, the clouds gradually clearing away from his countenance.

‘Yes, of course—wrote to her before I left England, again when we touched at Gibraltar, directly we landed here, and by every succeeding opportunity up to the present. But not a line have I received from her. I also wrote you a letter imploring you to write and let me

know what was the matter, but you and it must have crossed each other.'

'My dear boy, I believe you, every word, and I'm delighted to find you're not a villain, after all,' exclaimed old Bolitho, his face beaming with joy and affection, as he fairly hugged Warriner.

'Yes, but what about Florry? Is she ill?'

'No, no, she's all right; at least, she will be, when she hears that you're not the scoundrel you've been reported to be on the very best authority; and that you *have* written to her, and that you've *not* deserted her.'

'Deserted her! I should as soon think of deserting the colours in the face of the enemy. Come along,' added Warriner, seizing Mr. Bolitho by the arm and dragging him off. 'I see a long story is required to clear up this mystery, and this is not the place to tell it. Come along. Luckily the club is close by, and we'll go in there.'

In a few moments Mr. Bolitho, very hot, very excited, and very much out of breath, was puffing and blowing in a comfortable chair in a secluded corner of the club smoking-room, while Warriner sat opposite to him, anxiously awaiting the abatement of these emotions to

that point when articulation would become possible.

‘Dear, dear,’ gasped Mr. Bolitho, ‘to think now that I shall be the dove bearing back the olive-branch, telling her that the sea of trouble which was overwhelming her has subsided, and that——’

‘Come, come, Mr. Bolitho, never mind figures of speech,’ said Warriner, with a good-natured smile, for an eighteen-stone dove was rather rough on Allegory. ‘Tell me the plain unvarnished tale.’

‘Yes, yes, to be sure. Well, a couple of mornings or so after you left Puddleton, Florry came to me broken-hearted to tell me she had received a letter from her dearest friend, denouncing you as the most out-and-out scoundrel that ever breathed, and imploring Florry to shun you as she would shun the deadliest poison. Florry would have treated the communication with the most profound contempt had it not come from a friend in whose truth and affection she had the deepest trust.’

‘And who was the girl?’

‘Agatha Madingley, Florence told me her name was. The two were what girls call “bosom-friends” at school.’

‘Agatha Madingley ! And from what source did she obtain this wonderful knowledge of my iniquitous character ?’

‘From the very best source, she said—her own father, who had known you from childhood.’

‘Old Sir Tripton ! Well, I knew he had false teeth, but I did not know he had a heart and a tongue to match. And his motives for traducing me in this way utterly defy even guess-work on my part. However, this is not the settling-day with him. That will come in due course. Pray go on, Mr. Bolitho.’

‘Well, there’s not much more now. One true loving letter from you would have cleansed poor Florry’s breaking heart of the poison this vile calumny had poured into it ; but she waited in vain for that antidote, and your silence, taken together with this letter and your abrupt departure, all made out a very black case against you.’

‘But why didn’t she write to me ?’

‘My dear boy, if Florry has no false pride she has true modesty ; and would it have been truly modest in her to have followed, even through the medium of pen and ink, the man who was running away from her ? No,

no ; Ben Jonson didn't know what a true English maiden was if he thought he was describing her when he said, "Let her alone, she will court you."

'Well, but what became of all my letters?'

'Ah, that I can't tell you. There you bring me to the end of my tether.'

'Yes, but the solution of that mystery does not lie beyond mine ; and it is not only between me and the post that the matter will have to be settled,' said Warriner, doggedly. 'But there's no use saying anything more about it just now. As the melodramatic ruffian observes, "The time will come." Excuse my interruption.'

'Well, to conclude, I couldn't stand seeing Florry's sweet little face getting thinner and whiter each day ; and so at last one morning, after lying awake all night haunted by Florry's miserable little mug—excuse the metaphor—I suddenly made up my mind to start off after you, without telling a soul of my intention. So I packed up my traps, and here I am.'

'God bless you for your kindness, my dear old friend !' said Warriner, again seizing Mr. Bolitho by the hand. 'You have, indeed,

made me a bankrupt in gratitude ; for I can never repay what I owe you in that coin.'

'Nonsense, my dear boy ; to have a warm corner in two such hearts of gold as yours and Florry's, is indeed a rich reward for an old fellow like me, without kith or kin.'

'Well, I promise you will always have that warm corner in each of those two hearts as long as there is a beat in either of them.'

'Said I to myself, I'll go and break every bone in the villain's body,' observed Mr. Bolitho, in a voice choked with emotion ; 'and this is how I'm doing it,' he added, as he rose from his chair, and, on his characteristically large scale of doing everything, dropped upon Warriner's shoulder two tears of joy, weighing about one drachm each.

'And now, Mr. Bolitho, what do you think I'm going to do?' asked Warriner, as soon as the old gentleman had smothered his feelings with a silk handkerchief.

'I think I can guess go straight home with me by the very first opportunity'

'Exactly so. I shall throw up my appointment here on the Quartermaster-General's staff, which, I believe, has been a mere sham ; and as I am on the very best of terms with the

General and the Governor, I have not the slightest doubt I shall be able to get leave to proceed at once to England on urgent private affairs. There's a French despatch vessel starting for Marseilles to-morrow. I know her captain well, and I'm certain he will give us both a passage. Will that suit you ?

Old Bolitho brought his hands together with the report of a small thunder-clap, rubbed them vehemently for a few seconds, and then expressed his unqualified approval of the plan in the following emphatic terms :

' Ri-fol-de-rol-ti-tiddle-lol ! Ri-fol-de-rol-de-rido !'

As quickly as steam could carry them over sea and land, Mr. Bolitho and Algernon War-riner travelled to Puddleton ; and here thrilling intelligence awaited them. The town's normally even pulse was beating feverishly. Following the pernicious example of Brading-field, Puddleton had broken out into open riot. The operatives had put forth impossible demands, and their refusal had led first to a general strike, and then to open defiance of the law. There had been a serious riot ; but the Mayor, though urged by his brother magis-

trates to call out the military, had stubbornly refused to do so. The consequence was, the mob, emboldened by immunity from pains and penalties, had proceeded to acts of greater outrage, until, in order to protect valuable property, and still more valuable lives, the Mayor had read the Riot Act, and empowered the local police to fire. Two or three of the rioters had been wounded, one of whom had since died, and Mr. Buddlecombe was denounced as his murderer. Puddleton was at present chiefly engaged in the mobocratic amusement of hanging Mr. Buddlecombe's straw effigy in chains during the day, and burning it at night. There were, however, ominous symptoms that this pastime was beginning to pall upon Puddleton's now vitiated taste, and that it craved for a more satisfying realism, of which this was only the shadow.

Warriner was to be Mr. Bolitho's guest for the day, and as the two drove together in a fly to the latter's residence, through the streets of Puddleton, knots of sulky operatives, who had either not been to bed all night, or had woken up from their drunken slumbers before their brethren, were gathered at the corners doggedly nursing their wrongs until the opening

of the public-houses would furnish them with a more potent incentive than words.

Mr. Bolitho's return was welcomed with the wildest joy by his entire household, whose principal duties during the last fortnight had consisted in dragging the neighbouring horse-ponds for their beloved master's remains. The old housekeeper wept tears of joy, and then, suddenly changing her tactics, rated him soundly for the fright and grief he had occasioned them.

One of the very first acts of Mr. Bolitho on arriving at home was to despatch a note to Florence, telling her of his return, and asking her to come over at her earliest convenience.

A bath and a change of clothes, and Mr. Bolitho and Warriner sat down to breakfast. They had scarcely commenced when the former jumped up from his seat and rushed out of the room, exclaiming :

‘There she is, coming along like a little fairy, bless her ! You wait here, Warriner, my dear boy, until I bring her in. I must break the awful intelligence of your return.’

As Mr. Bolitho spoke, Warriner saw through the window Florence hurriedly walking along the by-path which the reader has already been

told connected Mr. Bolitho's house and Mr. Buddlecombe's. With a swelling heart he gazed upon the slight graceful form, and then, as she came nearer, upon the sad pale little face. As she beheld her old friend advancing to meet her, she rushed forward and threw her arms round his neck. Then old Bolitho, as he bent fondly over her, whispered something in her ear which made her break away from him, and gaze up into his face with a kind of bewildered joy. In the embrace her hat had fallen back, so that Warriner enjoyed the fullest view of what was, of course, in his opinion, the fairest and sweetest object under the sun.

In a few moments Algernon Warriner and Florence were face to face, and, as the reader may imagine, he had even less difficulty than he had with old Bolitho in proving his loyalty.

Later on in the morning Mrs. Buddlecombe, to whom the joyful tidings of Mr. Bolitho's return with Algernon had been communicated by Florry, came over, and was good enough to rescind her bad opinion of her daughter's lover.

But though Florence, Mrs. Buddlecombe,

and Mr. Bolitho were quite satisfied with Warriner's own refutation of Sir Tripton's calumny, he was not the man to allow such a matter to rest until it had been thoroughly sifted. The following day he proceeded to Belford Court, bearded Sir Tripton in his own hall, and elicited a written as well as a verbal confession from the old dandy, who, to do him justice, when he found the unexpected turn affairs had taken, was most anxious to set matters right, and did not spare himself in his efforts to make the *amende honorable*. Having settled this matter, Warriner returned at once to Puddleton, and the following day Florence received a long letter from Agatha Madingley, full of love and congratulations.

There was yet one tangled knot which had not been unravelled—the disappearance of Algernon's letters. But, by a tacit understanding between the two lovers, the subject was allowed to drop. Florry, for her father's sake, kept her suspicions to herself; and Algernon Warriner, for her sake, was equally reticent.

A review of the situation now disclosed to the lovers that the course of their true love, as far as it was influenced by Mr. Buddle-

combe, had taken a retrogressive turn. It was a case of 'as you were.' Under the circumstances it was agreed that they had 'better bide a wee' before reopening negotiations with him; but that in the meantime they would be ready to avail themselves of any favourable opportunity that might present itself.

The opportunity came rather quicker than they expected or could have hoped for.





CHAPTER XI.

KING MOB.

BUDDLETON became more and more demoralised. Tremendous capital was made by the professional agitators out of the death resulting from Mr. Buddlecombe's by no means premature order to the local police to fire, and the worshipful gentleman was held up to the scorn and obloquy of the mob. They called him a murderer, but in their eyes he was guilty of a still more heinous crime than murder—he was a man in authority over them.

Three nights after Algernon Warriner's return from Belford Court, Mr. Buddlecombe, who had sat up long after the household had retired, was in his dressing-room, divesting

himself of his clothes and wishing with all his heart that he could as easily divest himself of his cares and troubles, public and private, when Spigot rushed in terror-stricken.

‘O your worship, for the love of God send for the soldiers!’ implored the trembling and pallid Spigot. ‘The house is surrounded, your worship, and we shall all be murdered in our worshipful beds—leastways, I mean—O, send for the soldiers, your worship!’

‘Surrounded! Bless my soul!’ faltered Mr. Buddlecombe, standing aghast in the very airiest of costumes. ‘Are you sure you haven’t been dreaming?’ he continued, as he walked to the window, and, drawing the blind a little aside, peered cautiously into the darkness.

The action was detected by a portion of the mob outside, and a roar of anger and derision greeted the appearance of Mr. Buddlecombe, whose form had been recognised for some time by means of the tell-tale shadow on the window-blind as he had undressed himself. Simultaneously with the roar some combustible material was thrown on to a bonfire which had just been ignited, and a lurid glare lit up the scene.

Now we all know that 'man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority,' is overweeningly fond of posing in public ; but when merely dressed in a little brief garment he is not so proud, and a great deal of this foolish hankering after public display deserts him. To humility therefore, or to modesty, rather than to base fear, let us generously attribute the wondrous agility with which Mr. Buddlecombe withdrew from the public gaze.

The roar of voices and the flare of the bonfire speedily aroused the entire household, and in a few minutes the family and the servants were assembled in a terrified group in the drawing-room. Mr. Buddlecombe, now completely dressed, felt that some vigorous course of action devolved upon him. Summoning up all his fortitude, he opened one of the windows, and, while Mrs. Buddlecombe dragged at one coat-tail and Florry at the other, he demanded of the mob in a loud tone of voice what their object was.

Yells and groans and a shower of burning brands plucked from the bonfire constituted the emphatic rejoinder of the many-headed. A few of the fiery missiles fell into the room amongst the women-servants, creating dire

confusion in the petticoated ranks, and eliciting a shrill chorus of terrified shrieks. Mr. Buddlecombe at once saw the futility of any further attempt to reason with his besiegers, and there was nothing to do but to watch their proceedings and anxiously wait for succour.

The bonfire now received fresh fuel in the shape of Mr. Buddlecombe's brougham and Florence's pony-carriage, which had been broken up into firewood ; and round the fierce blaze men, mad with drink, danced, and yelled imprecations not only on Mr. Buddlecombe, but also on the members of his family. A new attraction, however, soon presented itself, and this was the appearance on the scene of Mr. Buddlecombe's barouche, containing the stuffed effigy of its owner. Amidst drunken laughter and yells the carriage was dragged and pushed on to the blazing pile.

All this time Spigot was going about the house in a frenzy of terror, wringing his hands and imploring everyone he met to send for the soldiers. At one time he took refuge in the cellar, until the recollection of a ghastly story about a man similarly situated being buried beneath a wave of molten lead from the burn-

ing roof, sent him upstairs again, three steps at each spring. Then he attached himself to Mr. Buddlecombe's person, under the impression that a certain amount of safety lay within the charmed circle of that divinity which hedged the great man's office, until he remembered that this same mysterious circumstance was by no means bullet-proof, and that if the mob took to firing in through the windows, Mr. Buddlecombe would be the main object of their aim. Jumping to the conclusion, therefore, that the safest point was that farthest from the object of popular odium, he mounted to the topmost garret, from which he was ousted almost as soon as he had reached it, by the appalling reflection that, if the mob broke into the house, and wreaked their vengeance on the inmates by throwing them out of the windows, he would have farther to fall than anyone else. In short, he was, in mind and body, tossed like a shuttlecock from one fear to another. The only constancy of purpose he evinced was in his oft-repeated prayer to send for the soldiers.

Most fervently did Mr. Buddlecombe wish that he could. But there was no one to send. No one dared to show his face outside. With

every moment the prospect loomed blacker. The mob, numbering about a couple of thousand, had, *en route* to Mr. Buddlecombe's residence, wrecked several public-houses, from the cellars of which they had brought, by means of carts and other conveyances, uncere- moniously 'requisitioned' for the purpose, enough spirits, in barrels and hogsheads, to steal away what little sense and humanity a week's idle debauch and pernicious advice had left in their heads and hearts. Many were mad drunk ; hundreds were rapidly descending to the same brutal level ; and probably not one was sober.

Yells and oaths rent the air. Neither was the scene without that singularly repulsive feature in the hideous lineaments of an infuriated rabble—the presence of fallen women. Many of these poor, draggled, and drunken waifs of frail humanity constituted themselves species of *vivandières*, and staggered about plying the swinish multitude with the Circean cup. As they rushed hither and thither, their matted hair hanging loosely down, they screamed with drunken laughter, and outdid the men in blasphemy and filthiness of tongue.

There were many men in the mob—as there

are in all mobs—who were rioters from physical or moral cowardice ; and these, as is always the case with men who are acting a part, roared the loudest. But their sham zeal in the cause of disorder was just as mischievous as if it had been real, and in practical life we have to weigh actions rather than motives. For, as that astute horsedealer, Mr. Buckram, remarked to Mr. Soapey Sponge, ‘If a man gets spilt, it don’t argufy much whether it’s done from play or from vice.’ And if a rioter helps to burn down your house, or deftly lodges a brickbat in your eye, it don’t argufy much to you whether his zeal is real or pretended.

Mr. Buddlecombe’s carriages being by no means like Othello’s tale of love, ‘unvarnished,’ burned very nicely ; the barouche, with Mr. Buddlecombe’s effigy inside, doing particularly well. But after a time this amusement seemed to pall upon the fiery tastes of the ladies and gentlemen engaged in it, and there were not wanting assurances from them, in the plainest of terms, that the next thing in the programme was to be the firing of the house itself, when Mr. Buddlecombe might take his choice between cremation indoors and an *al-fresco* dependence from an improvised gibbet.

A temporary diversion from this arrangement was occasioned by the appearance on the scene of about fifteen policemen; but they were in a ridiculous minority, and were soon forced to beat a hasty retreat, carrying off several of their number brutally, if not fatally, injured.

A new element of disturbance and terror now made the night still more hideous. The mob had fired the stables, and, as the flames rose high to the heavens, the agonised shrieks of two unfortunate horses, imprisoned within the burning walls, rose higher still; while the remainder of the animals, which had been released or had made their escape, galloped madly about the grounds, over lawns and flower-beds, or crashing through garden frames, in their vain efforts to escape from the scene of terror. There was one poor animal, a handsome bay mare, whose terror far surpassed even that of her stable companions, and as, with nostrils dilated, mane erect, and eyeballs starting from their sockets, she tore close past the windows, screaming and snorting, Florence, with a shudder, recognised her own pet mare. It was hard to believe, it was agonising to think, that this was the playful, gentle crea-

ture whose glossy neck she had patted and kissed a thousand times, whose soft muzzle had often rested against her cheek, and who had fed out of her hands like a lapdog. Stretching out her arm, Florence in vain tried to utter her poor favourite's name, and then burying her face in her hands, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

As yet no attempt to break into the house had been made, but suddenly a vigorous thumping at a back-door, against which Mr. Spigot had just posted himself, with the ulterior view of slipping out through it as soon as the rioters broke in at the front, chilled the women with terror and sent Spigot bounding up the staircase to his own apartment, where, as far as he was able, he precluded the possibility of being murdered in his own bed by taking up a position under it.

'Who's there?' demanded Mr. Buddlecombe, cautiously peering from a window on a landing immediately above the door, while the rest of the household, whom the common danger had made inordinately gregarious in their movements, crowded close behind him.

The reply was almost as cheering as the cry

of 'Land in sight!' is to the crew and passengers of a leaking ship.

'Is that you, Buddle? Let me in. It's Bolitho—Joe Bolitho!'

Amidst a chorus of thanksgiving, and as quickly as eager hands could work, the door was unbarred, and Mr. Bolitho admitted.

'Buddle, old friend,' exclaimed the hearty old gentleman, 'we must stick to each other in the hour of danger, for we——'

'Were boys together,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, almost choked with emotion, as he seized the proffered hand in both his, and wrung it heartily. 'Bless you, Joe! bless you, my dear old friend!'

'O, Mr. Bolitho!' gasped Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'O, Mr. Bolitho!' sobbed Florence.

'O, Mr. Bolitho!' screamed the maid-servants.

'Ah, my darlings, don't be frightened,' said the old fellow, as he put one arm round Mrs. Buddlecombe, and another round Florence, while the maids hung about him half-laughing, half-crying; 'don't be frightened. I've sent a mounted messenger to the barracks for assistance, and we'll soon have the red-coats here.'

‘Thank God !’ said Mr. Buddlecombe.

In the midst of her terror Mrs. Buddlecombe could not repress a significant glance at her husband. A change had indeed come o’er the spirit of his dream.

‘Come along,’ said Mr. Bolitho, ‘let me speak to the drunken rabble. It makes one’s heart bleed to think that they are Englishmen.’

‘But what has become of your other coat-tail, Mr. Bolitho? You have only one,’ observed Mrs. Buddlecombe, as the energetic old man led the way up the stairs.

‘Ah, thereby hangs another tale,’ said old Bolitho, with a laugh—‘a tale of mutiny; of mutiny in my establishment. They strenuously objected to my coming here, and, as my coat-tail was not made to bear the strain of even an old bachelor’s household hanging on to it, I left it in their hands. It’s what a sailor would call slipping one’s cable, I suppose. Ha, ha, ha! Now let me see if I cannot pour a little oil on these troubled and muddy waters.’

In spite of entreaties not to expose himself, Mr. Bolitho insisted on stepping out on to a balcony formed by the portico over the front-

door, a conspicuous and commanding position from which to address the crowd.

He was at once recognised, and greeted with many cries, amongst which were 'It's old Joe!'—'Give old Joe Bolitho a hearing, lads!' But this last advice was by no means in accord with the general temper of the savage herd, and a shower of missiles, one of which knocked his hat off, whizzed about the gallant and stalwart old fellow. Pluckily he held his ground with as little sign of anger as there was of fear on his brave benevolent old face, as he stood bare-headed before them, his white hair conspicuously shining in the fierce light of the bonfire. He would wait, he thought, until these ebullitions should subside, as they would be sure to do in a moment or two. No men, Englishmen least of all, could go on for more than a couple of unthinking moments pegging away, a thousand against one.

Little was old Bolitho, in his own goodness of heart, able to fathom the brutality of a mob, no matter whether it be composed of Englishmen or South Sea Islanders. King Mob is always a brute, whether he wears his filthy crown in the very boasted centre of civilisation or in the outskirts of humanity. He is

an irreclaimable old savage. He was as brutal two thousand years ago as he is to-day, and as he will be, arguing from the analogy of the past, two thousand years hence. Even when he plays—for sometimes his mephitic majesty does indulge in rough, coarse, uncouth play—it is the dangerous play of a tiger cub which may turn at any moment into tearing and rending. If he did good to anybody, even to the very lowliest of the lowly, there would not be so much to say against him. But he is an ill wind that blows good to no one. He certainly brings dearly-loved money, and, in these days, scarcely less-loved notoriety to agitators, but ill-gotten gains are no real benefit. It is a mistake to think—as a few people do think—that, like Robin Hood, he wars against the rich and the great for the good of the poor and the lowly. He is more injurious to the mechanic than to the monarch, to the peasant than to the peer, to the needy toiler than to the capitalist.

In vain old Bolitho waited for an opportunity of speaking. His calm dauntless bearing, his benevolent looks, instead of appealing to their better feelings, exasperated their worst. Conscious inferiority galled and

enraged them, as it always will gall and enrage small minds. They felt that whatever was good and noble and brave could not be on *their* side. The longer he waited the more the rioters howled and hurled their missiles at him. A dull thud, a spurt of blood, and down went the white head.

Stunned and bleeding from the temple, old Bolitho was dragged in through the window, amidst the screams and sobs of the women.

They were hanging over his prostrate form, chafing his hands, and wiping the blood from the white hair, which should have been as sacred from attack as a white flag of truce, when, with a cheering effect on their drooping spirits, a bugle up in the barracks was heard to ring out loud and clear. After their exploit of knocking down one old man, the intrepid two thousand became for a time a little quieter, as if resting on their well-earned laurels, and consequently every note of the bugle reached the scene of turbulence and terror. First the 'Alarm' was sounded, a call with a peculiarly and appropriately portentous rhythm, especially when sounded, as it generally is, in the dead of night; then the 'Assemble,' slow, long, and impressive;

and finally the 'Double,' quick, sharp, and crisp—the whole signifying, with no uncertain sound, in the sleeping soldier's ear, 'There's something wrong; turn out steadily and quietly, the whole lot of you; and look sharp about it.'

Of course the exact import of these calls was not known to our friends in their dire need, but they knew enough to feel certain that they meant succour was at hand.

'Thank God!' said Mr. Buddlecombe, 'Joe Bolitho's messenger has raised the alarm at the barracks, and our gallant deliverers will soon be here.'

Again did Mrs. Buddlecombe, notwithstanding her grief and terror, bestow a significant glance on her husband. This, it may be remarked, was not, under the circumstances, in accordance with her usual generosity and kindness of heart. But jealousy is cruel as the grave! She had neither forgotten nor forgiven the deep injury she considered her husband had inflicted upon her. That lethal dart still rankled in her side. Though husband and wife in name, though living under the same roof, their lives were sundered.

On the mob the effect of the bugle-calls was of course very different, and as the notes of

the last one died away, drunken shouts and shrieks of defiance filled the air with a hideous discordance. Luckily for the inmates of the house, the mob, instead of making short work of the business before succour could arrive, decided, in their drunken valour, upon the still more desperate plan of resisting the military, and for a considerable time they were engaged, under their ringleaders, in preparing a warm reception for the red-coats. On either side of the avenue, for about fifty yards from the entrance, dense bodies of rioters, five and six deep, were posted under cover of the shrubs, while a plentiful supply of ammunition was furnished by paving-stones torn up from the stable-yard and the bricks of various outbuildings, speedily demolished for this purpose. These operations occupied some time, the women, by means of their more capacious style of dress, especially distinguishing themselves—such as were not too drunk—as ammunition-carriers.

These arrangements having been completed, the remainder of the mob now turned their attention to firing the house. Piles of combustible material were placed at various spots wherever any woodwork on the ground-floor

of the building offered a good starting-point for the flames. A few minutes more and hundreds of eager hands had snatched blazing brands from the bonfire, and the work of incendiarism was fairly started. Already with a fierce crackling the tongues of fire were angrily licking trellis-work, and pillar, and joist, when the despair of the inmates was turned to hope by the cry that the soldiers were coming.

A fervent thanksgiving rose to the lips of those in the house, while with curses or ribald jests the rioters in ambush grasped their paving-stones or their brickbats, and, in grim brutality, awaited their victims.

There is a strange force in all order—a dynamic law of sound as well as of bodies. Even as twenty men acting in unison can overcome an undisciplined host, so will a regular and simultaneous sound be heard above a confused din of far greater volume. Though nothing like so loud as the uproar and hubbub of the mob, the regular tramp of the soldiers with the steady rattle of their accoutrements, as they doubled along the high-road, was distinctly heard at the scene of disorder. They had indeed turned out smartly.

Not more than twenty minutes had elapsed since the alarm had first roused them in their beds, and here they were fully armed and accoutred, nearly a mile away from their barracks. But they were old campaigners, well accustomed to the midnight cry of 'Stand to your arms!' and though, sad to relate, it was against their own countrymen that they were now called out, and not against the Russian, discipline exacted from them as much alacrity in the former as it had done in the latter case. More injurious, however, than any foreign foe are such 'poor discontents' as these. It is from amongst their own people that countries often suffer most. Internal diseases are always the most virulent and the hardest to treat.

The whole of the regiment had been turned out and remained under arms; but only one company had been despatched to the scene, under the command of the smartest and coolest, albeit the youngest, captain in the corps.

On they came at a steady swinging double, in full sight of the straining eyes which from the upper windows had been anxiously watching for their coming; and as the glare of the

flames lit up their bright uniforms, Mr. Buddlecombe thought that once hated and garish red rag just about the prettiest bit of colouring he had ever beheld in all his life.

Nearer and nearer they drew to the lodge-gates, close to which the ambush was laid ; and the main body of the mob yelled with delight as they thought of the broken heads and the dismay there would soon be in those now compact ranks. But though brave as a lion, the young officer commanding the party was, in soldierly instinct, as cunning as a fox. He happened to know the topography of the Mayor's grounds, and—— But here a word of acknowledgment is due to the intelligent zeal with which he must have followed out the military injunction to all officers to make themselves well acquainted with the natural features of the country in the vicinity of their camp or quarter. He happened to know, I say, the topography of the Mayor's grounds, and as his party approached the entrance thereto, it occurred to him that the first fifty yards or so of the avenue, with a steep bank on either side, well covered with a profusion of laurel, would be admirably adapted to the purposes of an ambush. Now a metaphorical wreath of laurel on a soldier's brow is

a source of pride to him, but a realistic brick-bat on the same spot from a laurel bush is not nearly so gratifying to his feelings. And indeed a soldier is not singular in this respect. Taking this into consideration, the young officer determined upon shirking the avenue altogether ; and it was fortunate he did so.

About a hundred paces from the lodge was a wooden gate leading into a paddock, by crossing which in a diagonal direction the house could be gained. Opposite this gate the officer halted his men. In a trice a pioneer's crowbar disposed of the chain and padlock ; the gate swung on its hinges, and the company doubled through. A yell of rage burst from the foiled mob, and in a tumultuous mass they rushed forward to oppose the progress of the newcomers. Overwhelming numbers, drink, and rage inspired them with courage.

‘Halt!’ shouted the young officer, as with a hoarse roar the dense mass of debased humanity surged towards the little party

‘O, it's Algy's voice!’ exclaimed Florence, clasping her hands and lifting her eyes up to heaven in an ecstasy of gratitude. ‘It is Algy coming to save us!’

‘Gallant young fellow ! Noble youngster !’

murmured Mr. Buddlecombe. 'I always liked him.'

The halt of the soldiers was construed by the stupid mob into a symptom of fear, and shrieks of derision mingled with the yells of defiance.

As a matter of fact, however, Algernon War-riner—for of course Florence's ears had not deceived her—had halted his men in order to form them into what is technically termed a 'close column of sections,' a more compact formation than the 'fours' in which they had been marching, and one better adapted for forcing its way through a dense throng. Moreover, even a few moments' breathing-time would be of service to his men, who had doubled the whole way from barracks.

The movement was soon completed, but not without molestation. A shower of missiles rattled through the ranks, and many a cut or bruise was borne with the patient stolidity of discipline. The women, however, more daring than the men—partly because, after a certain point, their natures are more reckless, and partly because their weakness is their armour, and they know it—were not content with this distant fusillade, and rushed into closer quarters. These drunken furies tore at

the soldiers' faces, and spat at them. Some even lay on the ground, biting and scratching, and impeding the movements of the troops by twining themselves round the men's legs.

Though quite in accordance with the female custom of war in like cases, these tactics were the result of accident on the part of many of these fair and fallen ones, who, finding themselves, through a crapulent unsteadiness of limb, in recumbent positions, had, instead of considering themselves—as poor weak men might have done—*hors de combat*, utilised the situation, and gone to work literally tooth and nail.

It is hardly necessary to add that War-riner's order was not carried out with the steadiness of parade-drill. But, nevertheless, the soldiers were soon knit together in a compact, solid little body, against which the roaring sea of humanity all round it might have beaten in vain.

The order was then given to the front rank of the leading section to fix bayonets. There was a crisp metallic trill, and a little row of glittering steel flashed forth a very forcible warning to the rioters.

A silence fell on the crowd, and the stone-

throwing ceased. It was not a white-headed old man that they had to deal with *this* time.

The steady double was now resumed, and on came the glittering little line of cold steel with the undeviating regularity and measured progression of a machine.

Helter-skelter, pell-mell, tumbling, shrieking, cursing, went the mob before the steadily-advancing bayonets, each man, as he ran, wanting very much to know what all the rest were running away from. But if not exactly unanimous on this point, their concurrent action was absolutely perfect. If not of one mind they were of two legs. On pressed the line of glittering bayonets, with its background of stolid countenances and red coats, until the terrace in front of the house was reached. Here Warriner halted his men, formed line, and bade them stand at ease.

‘Why, Bill, it’s like brushin’ away flies, ain’t it, after the work we’ve been having?’ remarked a seasoned old campaigner to the man next to him.

But ‘Bill,’ a grizzled and scarred old warrior, merely garotted himself in his stiff stock a little more comfortably, and deigned no reply. He evidently thought that in the double down

from the barracks he had wasted sufficient breath on the subject.

Such was the stamp of the glorious old British infantry which has been reformed from off the face of the globe. We may laugh at the stiff stock and pipe-clay school, but it may not be a laughing matter some day to find out that, together with the stock and pipe-clay, which could easily be spared, we have sacrificed the old solidity which army-reformers should have 'grappled to their souls with hooks of steel.'

If King Mob were to get a short innings in this country—which is by no means unlikely—Heaven help us; for I fear our six years' lads would be unequal to the strain at first. It would not be 'like brushing away flies' to *them*.





CHAPTER XII.

CONVINCED AT LAST.

THE fair reader must be kept waiting a little longer for the romantic *tableau* she has no doubt already conjured up. The men's work was not yet over.

‘Captain Warriner, I am delighted to see you,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, who had at once sallied forth to meet his protectors ; and a truer remark the worshipful gentleman had never made. ‘I shall not forget this night,’ he added, as he seized Warriner’s hand and pressed it warmly.

This cordiality was not reciprocated in the same degree by Warriner. He was polite, and that was all.

‘I don’t think we have yet quite exorcised the demon which seems to possess these unfortunate countrymen of ours, sir,’ he remarked, in tones more official than friendly. ‘If you were to read the Riot Act and empower me to take what steps I consider necessary, you may depend upon my acting with the greatest forbearance consistent with my duty.’

The necessity for drastic measures was unmistakable. The mob seemed now to have recovered from their panic, and dense masses of them were coming on with a savage sullen air, as if they were half-ashamed of their easy discomfiture at the point of the bayonet, and were determined to avenge themselves on the handful of men who had driven them like a flock of sheep. As they approached, there was less yelling and shouting but more stone-throwing. Altogether they looked wicked.

In the centre of the military, with Warriner standing by his side, and amidst a constant shower of missiles, several of which struck him, Mr. Buddlecombe read the Riot Act, and then once more called upon the mob, in the name of the Queen, to disperse quietly to their homes.

Yells and execrations burst from a thousand hoarse throats, and a general rush as if to overpower the little party of order was made.

Hurriedly the Mayor turned to the officer commanding the troops, and by a gesture—talking in the horrible din would have been idle—intimated that the matter was now in the hands of the military. With a formal salute Warriner received over the trust from the representative of the civil power, and turning to his men called them to attention.

Many were bleeding about the face and hands, and the air was thick with whizzing missiles, but they sprung to his word of command as if on parade at a general's inspection. It was not only that they were steady and smart in themselves, but they had seen Algernon Warriner proved a dozen times in fight, and, though a youth, he had a wonderful hold on the old veterans.

‘With ball-cartridge, load,’ was the ominous command that next issued from Warriner's lips, in a ringing tone that reached the ears of the rioters as plainly as those of the soldiers, as he intended it should do.

The bright ramrods gleamed in the firelight and rattled with a horrible significance as

they rammed home the leaden messengers of death ; and by the time the operation was completed the rioters were streaming away in different directions. Their discomfiture was complete.

No one was more pleased than Algernon Warriner himself that the dispersion of the mob had been accomplished without a shot being fired. A little later on, however, one shot *was* fired, and that one pierced a gentle faithful heart. Florry's mare in her frantic terror had eventually rushed headlong at a wire fence, and cut herself to bits. A bullet ended her agonies.

The first person to congratulate the military upon their bloodless victory was Mr. Spigot, who, with hysterical fervour, went down the ranks shaking the men's hands, and assuring them that the absorbing passion of his life from childhood had been admiration of the military ; and that he would himself have been a soldier but for his vile relatives and friends, who had one and all entered into a base conspiracy to frustrate his glorious aspirations ; though how they ever succeeded in doing so was to him, and would continue to be to his dying hour, an unanswerable conundrum.

‘Spigot,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, as a fourth edition of this tale of shattered hopes was being poured into a stolid private’s ear.

‘Your worship.’

‘Get away into the house. You’ve been frightened out of your wits, and you haven’t recovered them yet.’

‘Eh?’ said Spigot, with, for the first time in his life when addressing his master, just a vague shadow of a suspicion of mutiny in his tones.

‘Eh, what?’ snapped Mr. Buddlecombe, turning sharply round, and coming down on the feeble little flicker of spirit like an extinguisher on a rushlight.

‘O, certainly, your worship, most certainly,’ stammered Spigot, as he hurriedly shuffled off; adding, as soon as he had got out of the great man’s terrible influence, ‘And this is the return for the devotion with which I have risked my life in his service!’

The rioters being dispersed, there was no time to be lost in attacking the flames, which fortunately had not as yet made much way. Keeping a portion of his men still under arms in case of accidents, Warriner converted the remainder—after they had piled their arms

and stacked their accoutrements in Mr. Buddlecombe's hall—into a fatigue party, which at once set to work. The efforts of these men were soon seconded by the arrival, under an escort of a subaltern's party from the barracks, of two of the town-engines with their complements of firemen ; and in a short time all danger by fire as well as by riot had passed away.

Accompanied by Mr. Buddlecombe, Warriner, now that duty no longer kept him from where his inclination would have taken him at the very first, sought Florence and her mother. He found them, ministering angels, by old Bolitho's side, as the poor old fellow still lay in semi-unconsciousness on a sofa. As Warriner entered, Mrs. Buddlecombe rushed towards him, threw her arms round him, and gave him a motherly hug and a kiss. But Florry could only murmur, 'O, Algy !' in broken accents, and then tottering forward she fell into his arms in a dead faint.

* * * * *

Never did Duty and Inclination run more evenly in the same line—a coincidence by no means usual with this ill-assorted pair—than when Warriner, at the Mayor's earnest request, determined upon remaining for the rest of the

night at the scene of the recent disturbance, together with a section of his company ; while the remainder returned to the barracks under the charge of the subaltern.

A much pleasanter task than the description of such scenes as our characters have just passed through now devolves upon this pen. From horrible scenes of strife and terror now turn we to one of general reconciliation and peace.

Florence has regained her consciousness, and old Bolitho is, if not quite himself again, a pretty fair imitation of it.

Not less in Love than in War is Algernon Warriner the man to allow the grass to grow under his feet. In his opinion the opportunity for a definite settlement of the tender point at issue between the Mayor and himself has arrived, and he seizes it with a firm grasp.

‘Mr. Buddlecombe,’ he says, as with his arm round Florence he confronts her father, ‘I presume that after this night’s experience you have modified your opinion regarding the necessity for the existence in every country, no matter how civilised, of a standing force of men trained to arms and habits of discipline?’

‘Hear, hear !’ comes from old Bolitho.

‘Your objection to me,’ continues Warriner, ‘as a son-in-law, because I am a useless member of society, is not now so weighty as it was, probably.’

‘Algernon Warriner, I shall be as straightforward as you are,’ returns Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘There is a Spanish proverb which says, “A wise man changes his mind ; a fool never.” I should indeed be a fool had not my opinion undergone some change this evening. Take my daughter : and may you always guard her from evil as promptly and effectually as you, and your red-coats at your back, guarded us all this night. There’s my hand on it.’

‘Bravo, Buddle ! Bravo, old boy !’ roars old Bolitho.

‘Ah, Mr. Buddlecombe,’ says Algernon Warriner, as he holds the Mayor’s hand in his, and speaks with a kind ring in his tones, though all the same they convey a reproof, ‘it is as great folly for us soldiers to sneer at trade as for you traders to sneer at us. In different ways we are equally essential to our country’s greatness and welfare. When human nature shall be purged of envy, ambition, covetousness—when, in short, every man shall love his neighbour as himself, *then* laugh at your army

and navy as anachronisms, and sweep them away. But from what you have seen to-night—and remember the scene was laid in what we consider is the most civilised country in the world—do you think that human nature has arrived at that pitch of perfection, or is even inclining towards it ?

‘Confound it !’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, with a good-natured twinkle in his eye which would not have disgraced Mr Bolitho’s orbs ; ‘I’ve pleaded guilty, and I object to any further cross-examination.

Led off by old Bolitho’s roar, a general laugh ensued ; but I have to add, with regret, that Mrs. Buddlecombe’s laugh was sardonic.

‘Joshua,’ she said, ‘you quoted a proverb with something about a fool in it. Does not another proverb on the same subject—about there being no fool like an old fool—occur to you ? And allow me to remind you that there are more ways than one in which a man can make an old fool of himself.’

‘Georgina,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, who read the thoughts which prompted this biting taunt, ‘will you do me the favour to accompany me to my study for a few minutes’ private conversation ?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Mrs. Buddlecombe; and with a stiff demeanour she followed her husband out of the room.

‘Do you remember, Georgina,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, in an easy, pleasant way, as he unlocked his *escritoire*, ‘do you remember my receiving on a certain morning some weeks ago a letter which led to a slight unpleasantness between us?’

‘Joshua,’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe, bitterly, ‘sear a woman’s tender flesh with a red-hot iron, and while she still quivers under the torture, ask her with a smiling face if she is conscious of the “slight unpleasantness.”’

‘No, I won’t do that,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, with graceful *nonchalance*, as he drew a letter from a pigeon-hole, ‘I’ll ask you, instead, to have the goodness to peruse that document?’

With a countenance on which indifference, interest, hope, joy, and ecstasy were successively expressed, Mrs. Buddlecombe read from beginning to end.

‘Do you mean to say, Joshua, this was the letter?’

‘Yes, my dear.’

‘Then it wasn’t an assignation—at least

not a *romantic* assignation, after all !' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, as she threw her arms round his neck. 'O Joshua, forgive me for having doubted you.'

'Yes, yes. Now go and undeceive old Joe Bolitho. But the secret must not go farther than his ear.'



PART V.

*RETURN OF THE QUEEN'S OWN FUSILIERS FROM
THE 'SCIENTIFIC' FRONTIER.*



CHAPTER I.

TEMPORA MUTANTUR.

‘**B**OSHUA, you must not really. Now promise me, dear, you won’t go out. Remember your age, your sciatica, your lumbago, and your earache.’

‘Georgina, age, sciatica, lumbago, earache, and a wife—though last, not least—won’t keep me in this day. I *will* see them. They shall not pass my gates without a cheer from me.’

Reader, do you recognise in the old, old couple now speaking to each other from their respective arm-chairs, Mr. and Mrs. Buddlecombe, whom you have not met since the memorable night of the riot more than twenty years ago?

‘That’s all very well and very beautiful, Joshua. But *do* consider the lumbago.’

‘The lumbago, Georgina, does not consider me,’ piped the poor old man, as he struggled to rise from his chair. ‘There!’ he exclaimed, as the exertion induced a severe twinge; ‘there’s a proof of its want of consideration. So I maintain I am under no obligation whatever to consider the lumbago. And I tell you what it is,’ he added, with a savage effort, as he rose to his feet and tottered across the room; ‘no one shall hoist my flag but myself. On that I am determined, even if I have to stand on one leg on the top of the truck to do it.’

‘Ah, Joshua, Joshua, how the times have changed!’

‘Yes; and, as the Latin proverb adds, “we are changed with them.”’

‘Yes; and some changes have been for the better.’

‘Ah! and some for the worse. First of all, my appetite fell off; then my teeth went; and my digestion followed. Then came that dreadful trial, that fearful shock to my system, when the doctor pronounced a sentence of sago and gruel diet for the remainder of my natural

life. Slops with a French cook in the house ! It was heartbreaking, heartbreaking.'

'Yes, I have often told you, Joshua, that I thought it a most absurd proceeding to keep on a French cook when you could no longer enjoy his services. It only made the sacrifice harder to bear.'

'I could not discard him ; he had crept so into my heart,' said Mr. Buddlecombe with great emotion, as he patted his waistcoat, evidently under the same old hallucination with regard to the position of the seat of his affections, when stirred by a discussion on gastronomy

'Ah ! and *I* have changed too,' said the old lady. 'I'm a great deal older than I was, Joshua.'

'Well, that depends, Georgina. You are certainly a great deal older than you were a very long time ago. But, strictly speaking, you are in reality a very little older than you were a very little time back. And I don't know that I can't say pretty nearly the same sort of thing about myself.'

'Ah, Joshua, there are changes, dear old man, which I deplore with all my mind, but, on the other hand, there are changes in you

over which I rejoice, and of which I am proud. Do you remember, dear, when trade—more especially that particular branch of trade in which you had grown rich, the button trade—was your first consideration as an Englishman ?’

‘Georgina, in that amalgam of speech, composed of the Saxon, Norman French, and Latin tongues, which the use of ages has welded into a vigorous and redundant vehicle of thought, and which we call the English language, there is a fearful oath——’

‘O, Joshua, Joshua, pray don’t !’

‘A fearful oath, Georgina, which with all due solemnity I shall proceed to pronounce. Dash my buttons !’

‘O Joshua !’

‘Yes, and what’s more, just to prove that I mean what I say, I’ve a great mind never to use another button again, as long as I live ; but to lead henceforward a pure and buttonless existence.’

‘O Joshua, you always go to such extremes ! Do you remember that day, more than twenty years ago, when—when——’

The remainder of the sentence was lost in the folds of a handkerchief.

‘Ah ! yes, yes,’ said the old man ; ‘I know what you mean. This day does indeed carry one back, as you were going to say, to that day when—when——’

At this same point Mr. Buddlecombe also became inarticulate.

‘Ah, Joshua,’ said old Mrs. Buddlecombe, after a pause, and as with a trembling hand she wiped her wrinkled cheeks, ‘if this day is one which stirs up afresh in our hearts the bitter dregs of sorrow, what must it be to our darling child !’

‘Poor Florry, poor little Florry,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, the tears streaming down his furrowed face. ‘Ah, Georgina, we have paid our share of tribulation towards the maintenance of old England’s honour. But, Algy, my son—for such you were to me—while our hearts ache they also swell with pride. Though no tomb marks the spot where you rest, “He died for his country” is the epitaph we have all carved for you, Algy, on our hearts ; and carved too a great deal deeper than it ever could be on wood or stone.’

‘Isn’t it a strange coincidence, Joshua,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe, after a long silence, in which the two old people had been busily en-

gaged in wiping their eyes, 'that the Queen's Own Fusiliers should now come here to the same place which welcomed them after their last victorious campaign?'

'No, Georgina. You forget that Bolitho and I got up a petition to the Horse Guards, signed by all the inhabitants, setting forth that it had been to this place the Queen's Fusiliers had returned flushed with Crimean victories, and begging for the privilege of repeating the welcome to the same regiment upon what is, I am proud to say, a similar occasion.'

'Ah, how vividly and painfully that day is recalled to my memory,' observed the old lady, with a sigh and a shake of the head. 'It was a very enthusiastic reception they met with, Joshua, wasn't it?'

'Yes—well, yes it was,' acquiesced Mr. Buddlecombe, rather uneasily. 'The town, I recollect, gave them a very hearty welcome.'

'With the exception, perhaps, of the Mayor at that time.'

'Well, I believe he didn't go absolutely wild—at least not with enthusiasm. But he's changed his mind. I'm chairman, and Bolitho's vice-chairman, of the reception committee; and if we don't do the thing properly,

it won't be for lack of zeal and goodwill. We won't let our private grief damp the public enthusiasm.'

'Poor Florry, poor darling!' sighed Mrs. Buddlecombe; 'how the ringing of bells, the cheers of the crowd, the strains of martial music, will seem to mock her grief! But, thank Heaven, she will soon have her gallant boy to console her.'

'Yes, thank God, *he* has been spared through all the perils of the campaign, to be our child's comfort, I hope. Ah, here's old Joe Bolitho.'

Not with heavy tramp and merry song did old Joe Bolitho make his appearance on *this* occasion, but with a subdued air and leaning on a stick our old friend tottered into the room.

'Ah, my dear Mrs. Buddlecombe, how do you do—how do you do?' he said.

Mrs. Buddlecombe did not reply. She only looked into the sad kind old face, shook her head, and covered her countenance with her handkerchief.

'This is a day of conflicting emotions,' said old Bolitho. 'History repeats itself. Ah, Buddle, old friend, how do you do? History repeats itself.'

‘But *you* are not history, Bolitho.’

‘I know that, Buddle. I know that.’

‘Then you shouldn’t repeat yourself, Bolitho.’

‘Poor old Buddle ! he’s getting old, very old,’ murmured old Bolitho, as he shuffled off to place his hat on a table.

‘Poor old Joe Bolitho ! he’s dreadfully aged,’ muttered old Buddlecombe, as he watched his friend’s movements.

On the wall over the table where Mr. Bolitho placed his hat, was a large portrait of Algernon Warriner, and at it the old man stood gazing with an earnest sorrowful countenance, until the tears blinded him.

‘Poor Algy ! Our glorious Algy !’ he softly murmured. ‘And how is our poor dear bereaved Florry this morning ?’ he asked, as he retraced his feeble steps towards his two old friends.

‘Sweet and patient as ever,’ replied Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘But, O Mr. Bolitho, our child’s heart is breaking.’

In silent emotion the three old people sat for several moments. The first to speak, and naturally so, was the lady.

‘The gout to which you used to be such a

martyr, Mr. Bolitho, does not seem to trouble you now.'

'Well, I believe it's somewhere about me in a very acute form still, but upon my word, my dear Mrs. Buddlecombe, I haven't had time to think of it. Night and day for the last few months my thoughts have been with our two loved boys and their gallant companions.'

'So have mine,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'So have mine,' said Mr. Buddlecombe; 'but I managed to spare a few moments every now and then to remembering the lumbago.'

'I wonder what Lady Cecilia Warriner's thoughts have been!' observed Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'I wonder what they are *now*!' said old Bolitho. 'Surely she does not carry her resentment beyond the grave.'

'Well, I don't know; if she carries it for a quarter of a century I'd back her to carry it for ever; and, as far as I'm concerned, she's welcome to do so,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, plucking up his shirt-collar with one hand, rumpling up his few white hairs with the other, and comporting himself generally after the manner of very old gentlemen working themselves up into a passion.

‘Well, well,’ remarked old Bolitho, mildly,
‘there’s a saying, as old as the hills :

“Forgiveness to the injured doth belong,
But they ne’er pardon who have done the wrong.”

And I suppose the resentment is, if possible,
even more lasting with those who have tried to
injure, and have failed.’

‘Never even to have seen her grandchild all
these years!’ said Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘O
dear, O dear, how could a woman’s heart——
Joshua, where are you going? for goodness’ sake
where are you going?’

‘O, I can’t stand talking about that acidu-
lated old icicle,’ replied Mr. Buddlecombe, as
he hobbled off towards the door. ‘I’m off.
I’m going to get up on the top of the house to
hoist my flag myself. I said I would, and I will.’

‘O, nonsense, Buddle,’ said old Bolitho;
‘don’t do anything of the sort.’

‘And pray why not?’ asked Mr. Buddle-
combe, angrily.

‘Your age, Buddle, your age.’

‘What do you mean? Bolitho, what *do* you
mean? I am eighty-one. What more do you
want? If a man isn’t old enough to hoist a flag
at eighty-one, how much longer are you going
to give him to prepare for that arduous task?’

‘Well, well, Buddle, don’t let us have any words about it,’ said old Bolitho soothingly, for Mr. Buddlecombe was very angry.

‘Yes, but you say such extraordinary things, Bolitho—such silly things,’ returned old Buddlecombe, only half pacified. ‘You should try, Bolitho, to exercise a little judgment, even if you haven’t got any. The idea of thinking I’m too young to hoist a flag!’

Any further attempt the eccentric old gentleman may have made to carry his project into effect, was diverted from its course by the entrance of Spigot.

In none of our characters had time wrought so remarkable a change as in Spigot. Like Mr. Buddlecombe and Mr. Bolitho—with whom he was about coeval—he had grown very infirm; but, strangely unlike his old self, there was an air of easy, not to say defiant, self-possession about him, which Mr. Spigot’s own remarks and behaviour will explain better than I can. He was stone-deaf, nearly blind, and report averred that the fright on the night of the riot had turned his head.

‘Something’s up,’ observed Spigot in a free-and-easy soliloquy as he glanced from Mr. Buddlecombe to Mr. Bolitho, and then towards

Mrs. Buddlecombe, who, with the somnolency of old age, had gone off into a quiet little doze. 'Something's up. My new assistant's so busy.'

'*New assistant* indeed!' said Mr. Buddlecombe, glaring on the speaker. 'Why, he replaced you as butler about twenty years ago.'

'It's no use asking what's up, for they never hear you,' continued old Spigot. 'I'll give 'em another chance, though. I'll just ask this once.'

Going up to Mr. Buddlecombe, Spigot applied his mouth to his once revered master's ear and shouted in any but reverent tones :

'What's up ?'

'Bolitho,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, who knew from experience the futility of any ordinary vocal effort to reach the questioner's senses, 'let us make one last attempt to enlighten this old beetle. Come here, I've a plan.'

Mr. Bolitho willingly lent himself to the scheme, and the two old gentlemen retired to a corner of the room, where for some minutes they were busily engaged in twisting up a couple of newspapers to act as speaking-trumpets.

'I never speaks to 'em now,' resumed Spigot

while these preparations were in progress. 'What's the good? They never hear. It used to be uncommon vexing at first; but it ain't bad in some ways. I can say just what I likes before 'em. Now then, you two old door-posts!' he shouted, turning round. 'Now then, old All-alive-oh and old Detonating Powder, what are you two old stoopids up to? O lor', O lor', if they was only to hear me! He, he, he! It's as good as a play, it is. Better. *I* never see a play like it. He, he, he!'

'Confound your impudence!' said Mr. Buddlecombe, as he and Bolitho, each with his paper speaking-trumpet ready, advanced on either side of Spigot, who, with his hands on his knees, was rocking his body backwards and forwards and giggling. 'Confound your impudence! "Old Detonating Powder" will either make you hear this time or blow your head off.'

'You superannuated old cork-drawer,' chimed in Mr. Bolitho, 'I'll soon show you I'm "All-alive-oh." What shall we shout, Buddle?'

'Shout? Let's shout what's in every Puddletonian's mind this day but his; and it won't be our fault if it's not there pretty soon.'

‘And what’s that, Buddle, old boy?’

‘Welcome!’

‘Aye, I feel as if I could shout that with a will.’

‘Perhaps old All-alive-oh ain’t quite as deaf as old Cayenne Pepper; I’ll give *him* a chance,’ observed Spigot. ‘What’s up?’ he shouted into Mr. Bolitho’s ear, and then, as is usual with deaf people, awaited the answer, looking straight to his front.

‘Now’s our time,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe. ‘I’ll cayenne-pepper him. Let’s get our 200-ton guns into position—bang up to his ear—that’s it. Now, together.’

The next moment what may be termed a double-barrelled roar that might have awakened the Seven Sleepers filled the room. At any rate it awakened one sleeper, and that was Mrs. Buddlecombe, who, poor dear old lady, had been, for the last ten minutes, forgetting her cares and troubles in a peaceful little pussy-cat-like doze.

‘O, Joshua!’ screamed the poor old lady, terrified almost out of her senses. ‘O, Mr. Bolitho! What’s the matter? what’s the matter?’

Dropping their improvised speaking-

trumpets like hot potatoes, the two old fellows hastened to her side.

‘O, where’s my smelling-bottle?’ gasped Mrs. Buddlecombe. ‘I thought it was the Afghans.’

‘Well,’ said Spigot, still looking intently before him, ‘I’ve waited long enough. I ought to have known I’d get no answer. But I mustn’t blame ’em, poor old stoopids. They can’t give answers if they don’t hear no questions. How could they? Hullo!’ suddenly exclaimed Spigot, cocking his head very much on one side like a sagacious old parrot, and holding up a finger. ‘Hullo! I heard a pin drop somewheres. Some of them maids downstairs, I suppose. It was a hair-pin too, what they skewers their fal-lals on to their heads with, I should say by the sound of it. Untidy hussies! I’ll go and wake ’em up a bit. Making a chap jump with their row! I’ll make ’em jump with a corkscrew.’

With this bloodthirsty intention Spigot shambling off, and he had scarcely left the room when a peal of joy-bells clanged and clashed from a neighbouring steeple.

‘Ah! that means the regiment has just marched off from the station,’ observed old

Bolitho. 'Dear, dear, how this carries me back to that day nearly twenty-five years ago!'

'I must get ready,' said old Mr. Buddlecombe, fussily. 'I wouldn't miss seeing them pass my gates for a whole year's income.'

'O dear, O dear, I *should* like to see them too,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'So you shall, so you shall, my dear, dear old friend,' said old Joe Bolitho, as he assisted the old lady out of her chair. 'Take my arm. Come along, come along.'

Slowly and shakily the two walked arm-in-arm towards the door.

'Ah, Georgina,' soliloquised Mr. Buddlecombe, as he watched the two retiring, 'Georgina, poor old woman! How changed to when we welcomed the regiment home last time! How well I remember it! As she sailed out of the room with the majestic bearing of Juno, she sang a song and called me a brute. Dear, dear, these tender recollections are too much for me,' he concluded, as he hobbled out of the room under deep emotion.



CHAPTER II.

CHEERS AND TEARS.

THE three old people had not long left the room when Florence Warriner entered. Her dress was of course one of deep mourning, but there was deeper mourning in her pale sweet face.

‘So they have all gone,’ she murmured, looking round the room. ‘I came down to try and cheer them up. But I am glad they have gone. A bruised heart loves solitude.’

Yearningly her eyes turned to the portrait of her husband; then with a weary sigh she sat down and took from her bosom two worn and soiled letters. For a long time she gazed upon them, and then broke into a dreamy monologue :

‘My two priceless treasures ! Algy’s first letter, stained with age ; Algy’s last letter, my own darling’s last letter, stained with his own precious life’s blood ! They found it on the field of battle near where—where——’

The poor quivering lips refused to utter, even in a whisper, the cruel words ‘he was killed.’

‘O, Algy, Algy !’ she exclaimed, clasping her hands and turning her eyes to heaven, ‘intercede for me where you are, intercede in my behalf that I may be granted help to bear this as you have told me to bear it. O, let me read those sweet, noble words, and *they* will help me. I have them in my heart ; they are engraved there ; they are branded there ; but I love to read them as they were written by his own dear hand :

“MY OWN DARLING,

“To-morrow’s sun will set on England’s glory or her disaster, but not on her dishonour ; of that I am certain. We attack to-morrow, and if we are beaten it will be by sheer overwhelming force of numbers. When I compare our little band with the opposing host, my soul is full of the prayer offered up

by England's King on the eve of one of England's proudest victories—'O God of Battles, steel our soldiers' hearts!' ” ’

Again were the hands clasped, and the tearful eyes raised heavenwards.

'O God of Peace and Mercy, steel mine—a poor weak woman's!' was the prayer that burst from the poor grief-stricken soul.

For a few moments she remained in silent prayer, and then resumed the perusal :

“ ‘If we win the day the war will be virtually ended. If we don't win, why then the end of the war will be no nearer, for there is a vow registered in every true English heart that the only end this war is to have is a victorious one for us. And have I not a word for my own precious little wife? Is my heart so full of my country's honour that there is no room in it for my little Florry? Never think that. Don't, darling, be jealous of your country. Remember those old lines I spoke to you when you tried to dissuade me from going to the Crimea, and which you were so fond of :

“ ‘I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more.’

Dearer to me a thousand times than life itself are you, Florry, but dearer still is my country's honour. And yet, Florry, as I write these words, I feel that you are all in all in me. If I fall to-morrow, let your poor aching heart find comfort in the thought that it was my privilege, my honour, my glory, to be allowed to join that band of England's heroes who have cemented her greatness with their life's blood; and hold your little head high, darling, amongst women to whom the proud privilege has been denied of giving a husband to their country. Try to think in this way, darling one. Florry, it will be my dying wish, if I fall——"

' Algy, Algy, I do try; I *do* try, darling. But, O Algy, this is the only hard task you ever imposed upon me !'

' "If I live to return home, Florry, what joy unspeakable it will be to clasp you once more in my arms ! But it is better always to be prepared for the worst. If I fall, my dying prayer will be that English shouts of victory may be my *requiem*; that you and I, darling, may meet hereafter; and that until then our brave boy may be spared to be the

pride, the hope, and the comfort of your widowed life. And may God hear my prayer!"

'Yes, it *was* heard!' she exclaimed with passionate vehemence; 'it *was* heard, darling! English shouts of victory mounted heavenwards with your brave true spirit; and our darling boy was spared, though they tell me that, maddened with grief when he saw you fall, he threw himself amongst the enemy and courted death. But your prayer had been heard, darling—heard as the prayers of the noble and good always are heard; and God sent an angel of life to guard our precious one and to turn aside from him the steel and lead of the foe; and to-day I shall clasp him in my arms.'

The faint sound of distant cheering now reached her ears.

'He's coming, darling. He's coming now. I hear the people cheering them. Your old regiment you loved so, and which loved *you* so, is bringing him to me.'

Louder and louder rose the cheering.

'O, those cheers!' she exclaimed, with her left hand pressed to her side. 'They go

through my heart. O, it is cruel of them to cheer! It is unfeeling. Don't they know there are hundreds of hearts breaking in England? I cannot bear to hear them. What am I saying? What am I thinking? Forgive me, darling—forgive me. They're the cheers of Englishmen, the victorious cheers of Englishmen you prayed to hear. They're cheering your old regiment—your old regiment you were so proud of. Yes; there, darling, I can listen to them now. They were sweet in your ears, and they shall be, *must* be, sweet in mine.'

It was piteous, inexpressibly piteous, the way in which she tried to call into her white anguish-stricken face a look of pleasure, and a poor, weak little smile struggled for existence on her quivering lips, while the cheers swelled into one continued roar.

'Yes, there, darling, I'm listening; listening with pleasure to them,' she said; but the sickly little smile died away, and the heart sounded its knell with a sob.

Above the cheers now rose the soldiers' music.

'The old familiar march—the dear old regimental march to which *he* has so often

marched. How bright and joyous it used to sound ; but now it is like mournful wailing. O, with what a rush do those well-known strains bring old recollections to me ! The same old march to which they stepped so proudly when they first came here flushed with Crimean victories, and *he* was with them, the brightest, the handsomest, the noblest, and bravest of them all. They all said so themselves. O, I cannot, I cannot, bear this patiently. I am only a woman—a poor, weak woman, of flesh and blood.'

Like one demented, she now strode from one part of the room to the other, her hands clasped to her brow, and her golden hair streaming down her back ; and, in the frenzy of her grief, she rebelled against Heaven's decree.

'Why is not Algy,' she almost screamed, with defiance in her attitude and upturned eyes, 'why is not my own darling husband marching at the head of his regiment ? He led them through the fight ; why does he not lead them now ? Why should they be marching so proudly amidst the cheers of men and the blessings of women, while Algy lies cold, thousands of miles away ? Why should they

be the idols of the crowd, caressed and *fêted*, while Algy has not a soul to drop a tear over his grave? England's honour! what do I care for it?'—she stamped her foot as if crushing some worthless gewgaw—'O, I have paid too high a price for it, and I cannot pay it without a murmur. What is England's honour and glory to a broken heart? What is this glory—this loathsome thing they call Glory? Brave men's precious blood, and poor women's broken hearts. That is what Glory is made up of.'

Turning her bloodshot, starting eyes towards the portrait of Algernon Warriner against the wall, she paused for a moment to gaze upon it; and then, as if maddened by the reflection that this 'counterfeit presentment' was all that remained of what had been so noble and brave, she burst forth again with even more passionate vehemence:

'Glory? England's glory might have faded for ever; England's army might have been routed; England might have been humbled to the dust; England's flag trampled upon, if only Algy had been spared. What is this they tell me? What are these cant phrases we hear about this war checkmating the schemes of a

great, ambitious, and an aggressive Power? Russia's flag might have waved over every fortress in India; Russia's soldiers might have lorded it in every town in England; we all might have become slaves to the Russians—if only Algy and I could have been slaves together!

A cloud drifting across the sky obscured the sun for a few moments, and a passing shadow was thrown over the picture at which she was gazing so earnestly. The poor overwrought brain, sensitive to the slightest influence, conjured up a terrible fancy. Starting back with terror and horror, she clasped her head between her hands, and with straining eyeballs gazed on the portrait, while her voice, awed to a whisper, could scarcely articulate:

‘Yes, I saw it. I saw there what I never saw on his face. It frowned upon me.’

Rushing forward in a wild frenzy of grief and contrition, she threw herself on her knees before the picture.

‘O, forgive me, Algy! Forgive me! I did not know what I was saying. O, smile once more upon me! I am your true wife! I did not really mean what I said. I give you—I give you, my darling—I give you, my

own precious one—to my country without a murmur. O Algy !

Burying her face in her hands she sunk down, with all the abandonment of woe, into a posture half sitting, half lying, and so she remained quite motionless, with the exception of an occasional convulsive shudder throughout her frame ; while gaily played the band and loudly cheered the crowd.

Louder and louder grew the sounds as the regiment approached ; fainter and fainter they waxed as the regiment passed on ; but still that figure of despair lay crouching.

Noiselessly a little group appear at the door—three infirm old people and a handsome stalwart boy of about eighteen—and in silent sadness they stand gazing upon the figure. The youngster is dressed in the garb of a Queen's Own Fusilier. His uniform, though scrupulously brushed, is discoloured and patched in various places. His sword-scabbard, though brightly burnished, is much dented. Round his left arm he wears a band of black crape. His face, tanned by the hot Afghan sun, wears a sad expression, and as he stands watching that grief-stricken-looking form, a tear trickles slowly down his sunburnt cheek,

across which an Afghan tulwar has left a deep scar.

Wearily at last the poor mourner raises her head. In one moment she is on her feet and rushing forward with outstretched arms.

‘ My darling !’

‘ Mother !’





CHAPTER III.

THE OLD FOLKS AT HOME.

FOR several moments Florence War-
riner remained clasped in her son's
arms, while the three old people
looked on with tearful eyes.

'Come, hold up your head, little mother,'
said young Algernon as he turned the pale
sweet face up to his. 'There, you should be
the proudest woman in England this day.'

'I'm trying to be, darling. I am trying to
be. He told me to.'

'That's right, mother.'

'Yes, I'm trying to be proud,' she repeated
in a piteous little whimper. 'Help me,
darling, help me.'

'We should all be proud,' said the boy,

struggling to overcome the tremor in his voice. 'His name rings throughout all India. The whole army out there say Algernon Warriner was the hero of the campaign. There, mother, wipe your eyes and bear your loss bravely.'

'I'll try to, darling. But I must ask for help, Algy. Come, mother, it was from your dear lips I learned my first prayer. Come, teach me, mother, how to pray now with meekness and resignation. Pray for me too, mother; pray for forgiveness for me; for in the madness of my grief this day I rebelled against my God.'

'Come, my poor bruised reed; come, my darling child,' said Mrs. Buddlecombe.

'Stay here, Algy darling,' whispered Florence, as she moved away with her arm round her old mother. 'Stay here for the present with his two staunch old friends who loved him as their own son. Cheer them up, Algy.'

'If *I* don't keep up, old Joe Bolitho will break down,' soliloquised Mr. Buddlecombe, as his wife and daughter left the room. 'You'd a pretty jolly time of it on the whole, eh?' he remarked to young Algernon with an attempt to turn a sob into a smile, which brought his mouth round somewhere under his right ear.

‘Well, grandfather, we didn’t allow ourselves to be downhearted, you know. We always managed to keep up our spirits.’

‘That’s right, that’s right,’ said Mr. Buddlecombe in a lachrymose howl. ‘*We’d* a very jolly time here. We cried all day, and then by way of a change we blubbered all night.’

‘And so we managed to pass the time pretty pleasantly, pretty pleasantly,’ chimed in old Bolitho, half choked with suppressed sobs.

‘What true warm old hearts these two are!’ murmured the youngster. ‘Grandfather, Mr. Bolitho,’ he said, taking each of them by the hand and glancing from one to the other as he spoke. ‘My poor father loved you both as much as any son could love a father—as much as I loved him. He often told me so. Let me try and be to you both what he used to be.’

Upon this the two old men turned away their heads and fairly sobbed.

‘Old Joe Bolitho should exercise more self-control, he should indeed,’ blubbered Mr. Buddlecombe, as he shuffled off to one window.

‘Old Josh Buddle shouldn’t give way like this, he shouldn’t,’ sobbed old Joe Bolitho, as he tottered off to the other.

‘Poor old fellows,’ said young Algernon, looking after the two with a smile in which

sorrow and amusement were blended. 'Hullo, here's old Spigot!' he added, as that superannuated old servitor entered the room. 'Just the same as ever, I see, prowling about the house, regardless of time or place, and talking to himself.'

'My new assistant is emptying half the cellar of port, and champagne, and beer, and sending it away,' mumbled old Spigot. 'I've been trying to stop him, but of course he can't hear what I tell him. One would think old Fireworks was going to treat a regiment of soldiers. O lor', O lor', that's likely! He, he, he! it makes me laugh, the very idea. Why, a soldier to him is like a red rag in a china-shop. He, he, he!'

'Well, Spigot, how are you?' said young Algernon, seizing the old man by the hand and shaking it heartily.

The sensation of being grasped by the hand and having it violently moved up and down, suggested to Spigot the probability of somebody being in close propinquity to him, and it gradually dawned upon him that he might just as well look and see who it was.

'Why, it's young Master Algernon, I do declare. I ain't seen him since breakfast-time, I don't think. He's been and taken me for

the pump, I believe. Now, p'r'aps, I'll get an answer to what I've been asking all the morning. I don't suppose *he's* deaf. What's up, Master Algernon?' he shouted.

'Puddleton's celebrating the return of my regiment from Afghanistan,' was the reply shouted into the old man's ear at the top of the young one's voice.

'Deaf, like the rest of 'em,' growled Spigot, after a pause. 'I shouted loud enough, too.'

'Poor old fellow!' said young Algernon, walking away with a good-natured smile and shrugging his shoulders.

'Dear, dear,' said Spigot, more in sorrow than in anger this time, as he looked over his shoulder at the retreating figure. 'So young, and yet so deaf! Why, it seems only yesterday he was a babby I'd amuse into fits with imitating the drawing of corks with my mouth. But he wouldn't hear no corks now. I don't suppose he'd hear twelve dozen champagne corks if they was to go off all at once inside his head.'

'I'm still very much affected,' thought old Mr. Buddlecombe. 'I'll keep up appearances by saying something to Spigot. At all events, *he* won't detect the agitation in my tone.'

Bustling up to the superannuated old butler,

Mr. Buddlecombe endeavoured to speak a few words ; but, still too much overcome for utterance, he was only able to go through the motions of speech.

For several moments Spigot watched him out of the corners of his eyes, his queer wizened old face gradually wrinkling itself up into a knot.

‘O, don’t holler ; don’t holler,’ at last remarked Spigot, as he turned on his heel in the deepest disgust. ‘I can’t abide ’em when they hollers,’ he added, as he toddled off in high dudgeon. ‘I’ll keep myself *to* myself for the future.’

‘Now, what *are* you to do with an old image like that ?’ remarked Mr. Buddlecombe, suddenly finding his tongue. ‘He’s more trying than even old Joe Bolitho ever was.’

Here the confused buzz of a crowd close to the house attracted attention, and young Algernon Warriner went to the window to ascertain the cause. Upon showing himself, cheer upon cheer rose from the crowd which had assembled in vast numbers on the lawn, and the band of the Puddleton Volunteers struck up ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes !’

‘Ah, they are welcoming you back, Algy, as one of Puddleton’s sons who has been a

credit to his birth-place,' said old Bolitho. 'They haven't forgotten you were born here.'

'It is very kind of them, Mr. Bolitho, and I feel deeply grateful, I am sure. I must try——Grandfather, what *are* you doing?'

Well might the young man ask this question in considerable astonishment, as he suddenly caught sight of his old grandfather, with his wristbands turned up, going through a most elaborate prelude to a pugilistic performance behind Mr. Bolitho.

'My blood's up, Algernon,' said the old man, to whose martial soul the band and the cheers had irresistibly appealed. 'I burn to distinguish myself, and I thought I'd just hit old Joe Bolitho in the back when he wasn't looking.'

'But, my dear grandfather——'

'O yes, Algernon, I'm a devil to fight, a perfect devil to fight when my blood's up. You know I fought old Joe Bolitho when we were boys together. O yes! and I whopped him too.'

'What a rich fellow I should be if I had a sovereign for every time I've heard of that sanguinary encounter,' murmured young Algernon, as he turned away with a laugh; while old Bolitho himself walked to the window with

a good-natured smile on his kind face. As the crowd caught sight of it a regular roar of delight rent the air. Well might they make the old man their idol, for there were hundreds there in whose hearts the sight of his benign old countenance stirred up recollections of kindly aid in the hour of adversity; and they vented their feelings in loud cries of 'God bless you, old Joe Bolitho!' 'Jolly old Joe for ever!' etc.

Old Mr. Buddlecombe now appeared at the window for his share of public approbation.

'Three cheers for Mr. Buddlecombe and Mr. Bolitho, Puddleton's oldest and best friends!' shouted a leading spirit in the crowd.

Most heartily was this call responded to, and the band played a bar or two of 'Auld Lang Syne.'

'Thank you, thank you,' said Mr. Bolitho, as the demonstration ceased. 'Well may you play that tune for us two old fellows. We are indeed auld acquaintance, for we were boys together.'

'Now I'll make them a speech,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, with fussy emotion. 'Algernon, support me on the right. Joe, on the left. That's it. Now——'

The old gentleman essayed to address the

crowd, but he broke down most lamentably at his very start, and though his lips moved, no sound escaped them.

‘There,’ he mumbled as he walked off from the window, ‘I hope they liked that. It was short but to the point. It will all be in the papers to-morrow, and I hope they’ll report it correctly.’

‘Algernon, what is this,’ asked Florence Warriner, entering the room with hasty step and troubled countenance—‘more cheering, more music? I’ve come to you, darling, for you are my best comforter now.’

‘Why, mother, they are welcoming me home. You forget I’m a Puddletonian by birth.’

‘Welcoming you, darling? Then I should like to see them. Yes, let me look on those who are welcoming you home.’

‘There, mother,’ said young Algernon, as he led her to the window; ‘they don’t forget *him*. Look how at the sight of you a hushed sadness falls on the crowd, and they uncover their heads in silent and respectful sympathy. And it is not merely a sudden memory awakened by the sight of you, for see, the instruments of the band are dressed with black crape.’

‘I have seen enough, darling.’

CONCLUSION.



CHAPTER I.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER.

YES, ma'am, Mrs. Warriner *is* at home ; but, owing to a recent bereavement, she does not receive visitors,' said Spigot's successor to a tall, elderly lady, who, two days after the return of the regiment to Puddleton, drove to Mr. Buddlecombe's residence and asked for Mrs. Warriner.

'But I wish most particularly to see her.'

'Who shall I say, ma'am ?'

'Tell her that a fellow-sufferer with her by this recent Afghan campaign begs for a few words of consolation, which it is in her power to give. Tell her that, and I think she will see me.'

‘I’m sure she will, ma’am. Step this way, please, and I’ll deliver your message.’

The man’s confidence in Florence’s unbounded softness of heart was not misplaced. She at once responded to the cry of distress, though in her weak state of nerves an interview with a stranger would, she feared, be utterly beyond her strength.

As she entered the room the visitor rose from her seat, and, without a word, lifted a black crape veil, in order probably to be seen as well as to see.

With a stifled cry on her lips, Florence stopped short and stood rooted to the spot, while her earnest, searching gaze was returned by the visitor.

‘Algy’s mother!’ gasped Florence.

‘Yes; Algy’s mother,’ said the visitor, in soft, pleading tones, and advancing with her hands outstretched. ‘But Algy’s mother with all her pride buried in Algy’s grave.’

‘So is mine,’ returned Florence meekly, as she took both the hands extended to her.

‘You forgive me, then?’

‘O yes. A thousand times yes. He always told me to.’

‘Thank you for those words of consolation

which I have come all this way to ask for,' said Lady Cecilia Warriner, as she gazed with unfeigned admiration on the sweet sad face, and thought, 'Would to God I had seen her before, and I think I should have been spared all this bitter remorse.'

'And what did Algy call you?' she asked.

'Florry.'

'May I call you Florry?'

'Yes.'

'May I kiss you, Florry?'

There was no verbal reply, but infinitely more eloquent than words was the upheld white little face, quivering with emotion.

Lady Cecilia stooped down, and in one long kiss the two bereaved women mingled their tears together.

* * * * *

An hour passed away, and still Lady Cecilia Warriner and Florry sat hand in hand.

'And now, Florry, that I have opened my heart to you and told you of the long, long battle, lasting all these years, that I have fought with my stubborn pride, I have a proposal to make to you. I am possessed with a yearning which I cannot resist, to visit the spot where Algy lies, and there, together with

you and his boy, to pray that I may be forgiven for my treatment of him all these years. Will you come with me, Florry ?

‘ Yes.’

‘ Thank you, my darling daughter. And now take me to Algy’s boy. Take me too to your father and mother, and to that old friend my son loved so ; and if you and they will let me, Florry, “ your people shall be my people.” ’





CHAPTER II.

PILGRIMS OF LOVE.

IN the course of a few weeks the three pilgrims—wife, mother, and son—arrived on the frontier of the country fraught with such painful interest to them. Special instructions from the Indian Office had been received by the civil and military authorities on the spot to render every assistance in their power to Lady Cecilia Warriner and party. Moreover the country was quiet enough now ; and as, in addition to these facilities, not only Lady Cecilia's purse, but Mr. Buddlecombe's and old Joe Bolitho's as well, were at the back of the undertaking, it was by no means as formidable, even to a

lady of Lady Cecilia's years, as the reader might imagine

But love commanded even more valuable services in their behalf than money. Algernon Warriner had been the Bayard of the force, and as many of the regiments engaged in the campaign were still on the frontier, numerous officers who cherished his memory obtained leave of absence and formed themselves into as gallant and devoted an escort of horsemen as ever drew rein.

Without let or hindrance the party proceeded until within two days' journey of the battle-field on which Algernon Warriner had fallen. Here they were forced to halt for several days. A low fever had seized upon poor Florence, and the medical officer accompanying the little expedition, fearing the effect that the arrival at their mournful destination might have on her shattered nerves, absolutely forbade a further advance until rest and medical treatment had fortified her.

It was while thus delayed that a native was noticed frequently during the daytime prowling about the little encampment. Many natives were attracted to the spot by curio-

sity, but there was evidently something deeper than curiosity in this particular man.

On the morning of the second day of the halt he waylaid an officer who, from his appearance, seemed to be the senior of the party.

‘Sahib,’ said the mysterious native in Hindustani, ‘I want to speak to you.’

The officer addressed, being a major in an Indian cavalry regiment, thoroughly understood the remark, but not so thoroughly the military salute which accompanied it.

I can tell you what you would like to hear, sahib. But first promise me safety, sahib.’

‘What, you are a Pathan, and a deserter from one of our regiments—is that it?’ asked the major with a searching glance.

‘No, sahib ; no deserter, sahib.’

And here followed a long story, which severely taxed the listener’s patience, to the effect that while forming one of an escort convoying stores through the passes, they had been attacked and all killed, with the exception of himself and two others who had fled in different directions ; the other two had fled on horseback, but he had been forced to flee

on foot, his horse having been shot under him ; that on finding himself cut off from re-joining his regiment he had passed himself off as a native by the very simple method, the weather being hot, of casting off his uniform. Further, that while wandering about in this manner he had been compelled, by force of circumstances, to join in the general rising of the tribe in whose country he was ; and that eventually he had been in the ranks of the enemy's forces which our troops had vanquished on the day when Algernon Warriner had fallen.

Here the officer's patience broke down.

'Now what you're driving at is this,' he said : 'you want to return to your regiment, but you are afraid if you do so of being treated as a deserter who has served in the ranks of the enemy, and shot. Isn't that it ?'

'Yes, sahib. But I was no deserter, sahib. I served with the enemy because I would have died for want of food, or been killed if I didn't. I can show you, sahib, if you listen to me, that I was a friend of the English.'

The account the man now entered upon wrought an extraordinary change in the demeanour of the listener.

‘ Good God ! you tell me this is true ?’

‘ Yes, sahib ; you and some of your officers come with me and I’ll show you it is true.’

* * * * *

Within a quarter of an hour half the officers forming the escort, headed by young Algernon, a bright flush mantling his youthful face, rode off in hot haste, accompanied by the *ex-sowar*.

* * * * *

‘ Where has Algy been all day ?’ asks the poor, frail-looking invalid, as the shades of evening creep gloomily into the tent where she lies.

‘ He will soon be here, darling,’ replies Lady Cecilia, stooping down and kissing the hot brow ‘ He went out for a ride with some of those noble, kind friends of ours. They said they would not be back until the evening.’

Lady Cecilia thinks that with their usual delicacy they have, perhaps, gone on in advance to reconnoitre the battle-field, so that, when she and Florence arrive at the scene, as little time as possible will be lost in conducting them to the mournful spot where Algernon was seen to fall. But she keeps her

thoughts to herself, and sits silently watching by the sick couch.

After a time a commotion outside proclaims the return of the party. In a few moments young Algernon appears noiselessly at the door of the tent, and, with his finger to his lips, beckons his grandmother to him. There is a radiance in his face which he in vain tries to repress. She obeys the silent summons with a strange fluttering at her heart.

After an absence of about ten minutes she returns, accompanied by her grandson and the doctor.

‘Algy darling, have you enjoyed your ride?’ asks the poor invalid in a soft, sweet voice.

‘Yes, mother,’ is the reply in rather tremulous tones. ‘I have heard some news, mother,’ he adds, as he takes her hot little hands in his, while Lady Cecilia sinks on her knees behind the sick couch and silently offers up a thanksgiving to heaven. ‘I must now tell you, mother, what we have kept from you hitherto, that my poor dear father’s body was never recovered.’

‘O Algy!’ says Florence in a piteous wail, ‘why tell me this now? Why stab my heart

afresh with the horrible thought that my darling may have been tortured, mutilated ?

‘No, mother ; I could not be so cruel. On the contrary, I wish to try and win you from always dwelling on this sorrow.’

‘Would you have me forget him then, Algy ?’ she asks reproachfully.

‘No, that I wouldn’t. But what I mean is, mother, wouldn’t it be better than this blank despair if you were to try and conjure up some brighter fancies, even though you knew they were *only* fancies ? For instance, suppose now, instead of always thinking about never seeing him again in this world, we were to imagine a little sort of happier story about him, just in the same way as when people are worried and wearied with the real cares of life they often take up a novel and find in it, at all events, a change of thought. We might picture him, you know, being carried off by the Afghans ; for you see, mother, when the old regiment saw him fall they staggered for a bit and gave ground before a furious rush of the enemy, and before we had regained the ground we had lost in this way they might have carried him off, insensible from his wounds, but not dead. And suppose he had

been found by a man who had served in one of our Indian regiments, but who was now, from force of circumstances, serving with the Afghans. And wouldn't it be strange, mother, if it had so happened that my father had once saved, at the risk of his own life, that of this very man when he had been wounded while acting as my father's mounted orderly in some *reconnaissance* in the early part of the campaign? You know it is just the sort of thing my father would have done, and not said a word about it to anybody; and it is just the sort of thing a man to whom it was done would not be likely to forget.'

Half dazed, Florence Warriner now watches her boy's countenance, and she hangs with breathless interest on every word that falls from his lips. A thought too bright, too dazzlingly bright for her mental gaze is rising above the black horizon of despair.

'And suppose, mother,' continues the young soldier in his schoolboyish phraseology—'suppose, mother, this man, in the fulness of his gratitude, saved my father from the Afghans by first pretending the wounded Englishman was his own victim on whom he was about to wreak his vengeance, and then hiding

him for weeks and weeks from them, and then nursing him, as he lay more dead than alive, in a miserable little hut for weeks, and even months, afraid to ask for assistance, afraid to move him for fear of discovery, unable to leave him——'

'What does this mean?' asks Florence, suddenly starting up and looking wildly about her. 'Does Algy live?' she gasps.

'My darling, let us hope that he does,' says Lady Cecilia, as she rises from her knees and strains Florence to her heart beating with joy.

'You would never tell me to hope unless you knew that he lived,' says Florence in a hoarse whisper. 'O, if he is here, bring him to me. I can bear it. Algy!' she screams, 'if you are here come to me, my darling!'

With feeble steps a gaunt, emaciated figure in a native dress enters.

A cry rings through the tent, a cry of wild joy, and in another moment Algernon War-riner, the war-worn, broken-down soldier, is clasped in Florence's arms.

THE END.

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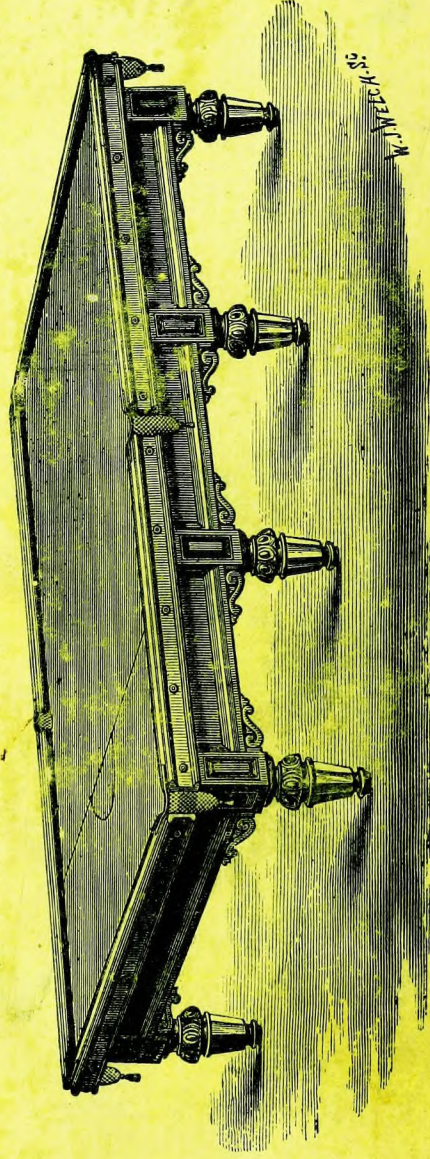
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